


## **The National Forestry Service, Steward of our Public Lands or Partner to Corporate Interests?**

 The National Forestry Service is tasked with maintaining our National Forests and Public Lands. The Forestry Service was originally developed and funded completely through the government. Over the years, the overall budget total for the agency has remained flat and/or has continued to be reduced. Because of escalating operating costs and continued pressures to enact government budget cuts, the Forest service has been forced to rely on creative ways to finance its own existence.


The Forest Service Mission Statement published in the USDA Forest Service Strategic Plan, FY 2007-2012, Published July 2007 states the overall goals and objectives of the Forestry Service as;


Forest Service Mission: “Sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations”.


Forest Service Values:

 The Forest Service –

- Cares for the Nation’s forests and grassland ecosystems.
- Values the varied skills and contributions of a diverse workforce.
- Strives for accountability by every employee for the efficient management of the capital resources he or she uses.
- Is responsive to national and local interests.
- Is focused on the needs of future generations.

 Currently the Forestry Service budget consists of government funding that represents 87% of its total budget with the remainder of the budget funded through the private lease of public land. Being the steward of public lands, does the forestry service have the right to decide on how to allocate public land for private use in the name of revenue generation in order to supplement its operating budget and fulfill its own mission statement? The

 agency struggles to balance the economic reality of a budget shortfall which keeps it from successfully fulfilling its own stated goals.

According to the economic summary developed for the Forestry service by Hardner & Gullison in 2006 the U.S. National Park and Forestry system face a daunting reality; while the overall public good of having the National Parks and Forests is of great economic value to the public the funding available to support this resource is woefully falling short. 

“The U.S. National Park and Forestry System generate at least four dollars in value to the public for every tax dollar invested in its annual budget. Yet, every year the parks suffer an operating shortfall of \$800 million, in addition to a massive multi-billion dollar maintenance backlog. As a result, the fiscal crisis confronting the national parks continues to deepen and important park functions go without, park infrastructure decays, natural ecosystems are overrun with exotic species, historical treasures are inadequately preserved, and public safety is jeopardized”. (Hardner & Gullison. “The U.S. National Park System, An Economic Asset at Risk”, Published May 30, 2006.)

Private use of public lands is not a recent development. Private Corporations have been eager to provide the supplemental funding the agency is lacking. Over the years public lands have been used for grazing cattle by ranchers, resource mining as well as logging for both respective industries. The local communities comprised of ranchers and mills have supported the government’s policy of leasing public lands for private use since these towns are most wholly supported by the respective industry. The loss of business from these industries would most certainly be the demise of the local economy. Remote from the local communities that benefit from the grazing, mining and logging the outcry from the general public has been to stop the practice of utilizing public lands for these types of destructive use.

A recent development in the use of private corporations for budget supplementation has been the lease of public lands for the development of highly commercialized recreation and resort facilities. By partnering with corporations looking to develop private recreational areas the Forest Service has found another venue for funding it can use to supplement its own budget deficit.

The lease of these lands for private development creates a positive financial impact to the agency’s bottom line in turn causing a greater benefit to the whole public lands system. The promotion of recreational facilities also promotes the Forestry Services facilities throughout the organization by bring “nature” within the reach of the general population who otherwise may not be exposed to the national parks systems, but does the overall system benefit outweighs the potential misuse and destruction of the land leased to these private corporations?

It has been argued that any or all of these uses have caused long-term damage to the land. The Forestry Service is in the position of balancing the public use of these lands for all with the long-term affects of each use. The self-funding position the government has placed on the service has complicated the decision making of the agency forcing them to take a more economic outlook to the use of public lands in order to maintain their own viability. Does this position of self preservation place the agency in a position of neutrality to make decisions based on what’s best for the public in regards to the long-term viability of the land or are decisions influenced by the economic necessities of maintaining the short term sustainability of the agency at the benefit of corporations instead of preserving the land the agency was created to protect?

Is the development of public lands by corporations seeking economic gain bad for the environment or is the degradation of some lands a public cost we must pay in order to expose more people to nature which in turn will create a greater good for all? The use of public lands for the development of ski areas complicates these decisions further. Is it ethically correct for the Forestry Service to allow use permits for this type of development which promotes use of the public lands but at the detriment of local communities that find themselves in the path of commercial development by the ski area companies which changes the local landscape and communities in what many would argue a purely negative way. Is the growth and development within these mountain communities actually a negative or a detriment if it brings services and business opportunities to these communities which otherwise would not be available to its residents?

Should the Forest Service be held responsible for promoting the degradation of areas surrounding public lands through the overdevelopment of resort areas which heavily impact the local communities? It can be argued that resort development brings a positive impact to the local economies of the surrounding areas. It can also be argued that the development of resort communities displaces the local residents of these areas by raising the cost of living and housing beyond their reach.

The development of natural areas for the promotion of recreational and resort facilities does allow the exposure of nature to many in the population who have a desire to return to nature but physically are not capable of camping, hiking, etc. These developed areas may be just what are needed in order keep a positive emphasis on the need to have open spaces and preserve areas for future generations.

While most certainly not the intent of the Forestry Service, there is an irony in the fact that by leasing public lands to private corporations in order to supplement their own budget for preserving public lands the Forestry service controls, the agency is promoting an industry known for major environmental destruction through the use of water and energy for snow making as well as the destruction of natural habitat that adversely affects the local eco-systems.



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