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# counterpunch

**edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair**

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## Time for a Fresh Look

### Saving Northwest Forests

by FELICE PACE

U.S. District Judge Marsha Pechman recently ruled that a Bush Administration attempt to dismantle the Northwest Forest Plan is illegal. While this is only the latest news in a long-running saga of logging and lawsuits it does signal a turning of the tide. Since he was appointed almost six years ago, Assistant Secretary for Natural Resources Mark Rey has been working methodically to roll back the Clinton-era plan. Today's decision means that those efforts have faltered.

More failures are sure to follow. That's because the Plan Clinton's people shepherded through the tangles of the Forest Service bureaucracy and Northwest timber politics had already maximized the amount of timber that could be cut under the National Forest Management Act, the law judges are sworn to uphold. Mark Rey can do a lot of things but, so far, he can't get Congress to change the National Forest Management Act or judges to ignore the established law of the land. And so most of his efforts will inevitably fail.

Are we then doomed to go through another cycle of Northwest Timber Wars? There may be another path.

Neither the timber industry nor conservationists are pleased with the Northwest Forest Plan. Because it started with a Northern Spotted Owl management system as its base and because aquatic protection was added late in the game and never fully integrated, the Northwest Forest Plan may not be the optimal solution to preserve the Northwest's forest ecosystems while providing for reasonable human needs and uses.

A patchwork of provisions cobbled together in a short time, the Northwest Forest Plan relied on a plethora of scientific processes to assure (monitor) that it was working. One critical disadvantage of such a plan is its cost. The NWFP is too complicated and too expensive. Another key limitation is the Plan's failure to provide much in the way of dense forest connectivity.

The issue of connectivity brings us full circle. The lawsuit defeat today was the Bush Administration's attempt to get rid of a provision of the Northwest Forest Plan that arose because that Plan did not provide habitat connectivity for small, rare and little known Old Growth species.

What if a smaller group of scientists who know these forests intimately were to construct a different plan that begins from the premise that all species and all ecosystem processes must be fully accommodated? I suspect such a plan would build a reserve system around existing wilderness and roadless areas. It would certainly be drawn along watershed lines. And it would stress connectivity. I also suspect scientists would surround this connected web of reservelands with a matrix of forests managed for multiple uses including careful logging and dotted with human community zones where fire risk reduction would be the top priority.

I am suggesting that the end of the Northwest timber wars could be a different forest plan that works better for all interests except perhaps for the Forest Service bureaucracy. Because of that bureaucracy, however, and for a variety of other reasons, an alternative Northwest Forest Plan is not likely to emerge from the government. It would have to be done by private scientists financed with private money. While it would be a gamble, key players on the industry and conservation sides recognizing their shared dissatisfaction with the current plan, the potential for a simpler and cheaper plan and the futility of endless war – might muster the courage and boldness to join together in support of an independent planning effort. Is anyone interested?

FELICE PACE served for fifteen years as Conservation Director of the Klamath Forest Alliance (KFA) where he now volunteers as a senior counselor. While working for KFA from 1989 through 2003, Pace spearheaded numerous administrative appeals and several lawsuits to protect forests from logging and road building. He was a presenter at President Clintons Forest Conference in Portland and an early champion of efforts to put timber folks to work restoring forests and streams. He can be reached at: [felice@jeffnet.org](mailto:felice@jeffnet.org)