

**"America's Best Political Newsletter"** Out of Bounds Magazine

# counterpunch

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

*Weekend Edition March 28-30, 2008*

## **Ashes of Lies: Why No One Trusts the US Forest Service**

by FELICE PACE

It's a pity really! For generations employees of the United States Forest Service – clad in their crisp green uniforms and with Smokey the Bear always nearby – were among the most trusted government officials in the world. But over the past 25 years that image has changed dramatically. Now, if Americans think about US Forest Service rangers at all, they are likely to liken them to snake oil salesmen.

The reason for the public's distrust was demonstrated once again recently when the Forest Service decided to open half a million acres of Southern California backcountry to road building and oil drilling. The decision flew in the face of Forest Service and Bush Administration assurances that state governments would have a voice in deciding the fate of national forest roadless lands. California officials had stated quite clearly that they wanted the remaining roadless lands in the Golden State to stay that way—roadless.

The governor (aka Governor Schwarzenegger) was not pleased with the Forest Service; on February 28th the state filed a lawsuit in federal court challenging the decision.

In reacting to the lawsuit's filing, Forest Service spokesperson Allison Stewart would not comment on the oil drilling. But she did comment on the roads. According to Stewart the roads are needed to fight fires which, she asserted, have been a perennial problem in the wilderness.

Really?

Since 2001 the US Governments Interagency Fire Center (the forest Service is one of the participating agencies) has collected and displayed on its web site wildland fire statistics for regions and the nation as a whole. Between January 1 2001 and January 1 2007 Southern California averaged 621 lightning fires per year; during the same period there were an average of 3,819 human-caused fires per year. The lightning fires burned an average of 23,167 acres per year; the human-caused fires burned an average of 273,333 acres each year during the same period. You can view the data at [www.nifc.gov/fire\\_info/lightning\\_human\\_fires.html](http://www.nifc.gov/fire_info/lightning_human_fires.html).

Clearly in Southern California human caused fires are a much bigger problem than lightning fires. According to the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research which has studied fires across the western US. increasing road density is correlated with increasing wildfires. More roads in Southern California's roadless lands will undoubtedly result in more human-caused fires and more risk to human life and property. And the Forest Service knows this.

Once again the Forest Service has demonstrated that it is willing to say anything to justify its decisions. 1984 is alive and well inside those brown buildings! Black is white; ignorance is strength and cultivating public fears is the mothers milk.

But the American People are not buying it.

How many millions of dollars has the Forest Service expended trying to figure out how to regain the public's trust? Meanwhile the solution is obvious. Forest Service officials should stop the shuck and jive and start telling the truth!

FELICE PACE has lived amid Northern California forests and been a forest activist since the late 1970s. Since 1987 he has walked through and studied all large wildfires that have burned in the Klamath Mountains of Northwest California and Southwest Oregon. He can be reached at: [unofelice@gmail.com](mailto:unofelice@gmail.com)