



## **Timber Harvesting on Federal, State, and Other Public Forest Lands**

*This position was adopted by the SAF Council on December 9, 2001. It was revised and renewed on June 10, 2007 and June 2, 2012. It will expire on June 2, 2017 unless it is further extended by the SAF Council.*

### **Position**

The Society of American Foresters supports commercial and non-commercial timber harvesting as an objective and the primary means for maintaining resilient and sustainable forests on federal and other public lands. Experience around the world has shown that, to achieve sustainability, forested landscapes must provide a robust and mutually supportive complement of environmental, economic and social values. Although the relative emphasis of these values varies among ownership types and locations, it is essential that all values be considered as legitimate options in the management of public forestlands. Most public forestlands are governed by laws and policies that allow or mandate sustainable timber harvesting with appropriate resource management planning. When carefully planned and supervised by professional foresters and other resource specialists, timber harvesting can be compatible with, and in fact support, other values such as fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, and recreation. SAF believes that the use of renewable, recyclable, and biodegradable forest products from public lands is imperative given our nation's increasing resource needs and sustainability concerns.

### **Issue**

For many decades, timber harvesting on public lands in the United States was an important source of socioeconomic benefits to society as well as a key means for professional foresters to meet diverse resource management objectives. However, public policy, litigation, and budget restrictions have greatly reduced public timber harvests in recent years, especially on federal lands. For example, harvests on our National Forests declined by 78% between 1987 and 2011, from 11.3 to 2.5 billion board feet (bbf) (USFS 2011). This is far below the long-term, sustainable capability of these lands (12.2 bbf cited in Fedkiw 1998). Consequently, forestry and wood products manufacturing employment, which is concentrated in the rural communities near forestlands continues on a downward trend. Furthermore, current harvest levels on national forest and other federal lands remain insufficient to: 1) maintain forest health and resiliency, 2)

control epidemic levels of insect damage, 3) reduce hazardous fuels to limit wildfire risk, 4) mitigate the effects of catastrophic wildfire, and 5) improve habitat for special status plants and animals. Despite such concerns, some groups and political leaders continue to advocate major restrictions or even total bans on commercial timber harvest on public forestlands. Supporting arguments focus on environmental risks and the view that commercial activity on public forests is inappropriate, costly, and simply benefits large corporations. However, deteriorating forest health and wildfire problems in many public forests where harvesting has been greatly reduced suggest that continued or expanded restrictions may simply exacerbate environmental and socioeconomic concerns in affected areas. Similarly, demands for forest products continue to increase, and environmental impacts from the use of alternative materials or imported products can be significant.

## **Background**

### *Our public forestlands are very extensive and productive*

The United States has approximately 328 million acres of forestlands in public ownership (Smith et al. 2009), an area comparable to nearly all of the states in the Eastern Time Zone. About a quarter (75 million acres) of these lands has been designated as wilderness areas, parks, and other major reserves where harvest of commercial products is normally prohibited. However, nearly half (158 million acres) of our public forestland can grow wood products for commercial use; this represents about 31% of such land in the United States and includes some of the most productive forests in the world. About 113 million acres of these productive forestlands are in federal ownership, and 45 million acres are state, county, and municipal lands.

### *Sustainable commercial harvest is allowed or required*

The 158 million acres of unreserved, productive public forestlands in the United States have been established and managed under laws that typically allow or mandate sustainable commercial harvests. For example, the federal Organic Act of 1897 directs federal forest managers “to improve and protect the forest, .. [secure] favorable conditions of water flows, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of the citizens of the U.S.” Such laws also direct a significant proportion of the revenue from such harvests to local governments. Similarly, many state and local policies require that public forestlands be managed to produce sustainable revenues to counties, schools, and local taxing districts.

### *Policies and practices protect other values*

Although the concept of sustainable forestry is widely endorsed in the US, this approach for integrating environmental, economic and social values is not consistently applied in public forest management. Commonly, the public is presented with a conflict model that suggests that economic, environmental, and social values are mutually exclusive, and consequently harvest must be excluded or greatly curtailed. However, federal and state laws and policies provide strong protections for social and environmental values that can be integrated with economic goals. Timber harvest planning and practices have improved greatly in recent decades and continue to respond to both evolving knowledge and public concerns and laws for protecting diverse resource values, and economical harvesting is usually possible with careful planning and when extensive delays from administrative appeals and litigation are avoided.

### Commercial timber harvest is a key land management tool

America's forests are constantly changing. Trees and other vegetation grow, shed branches and foliage, compete for space and nutrients, and eventually die from crowding, insect or disease infestations, or wildfire. Many public forests in America are currently susceptible to fire and disease, or are not meeting resource management objectives. Timber harvest is a tool that can move, even expedite a forest towards a desired condition while capturing economic value in the process. On both federal and state lands, teams of professional foresters and other resource specialists carefully plan and supervise harvests to protect or enhance diverse resource values, including fish and wildlife habitats, water quality and recreational opportunities. Resource professionals recognize that harvest plans must vary according to site conditions and management objectives. Important goals such as improvements to fish habitat, recreational areas, and roads are facilitated by the income, equipment, and skilled personnel made available by local commercial operations.

### Economic benefits are large and broad

Commercial timber harvests provide significant economic benefits, including helping to pay for management for diverse values. America's wood products and paper manufacturing sector employs approximately 900,000 workers, representing nearly 7% of manufacturing jobs in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Additionally, there are hundreds of thousands of jobs in logging, trucking, road construction, and forest and management services. Forest product employment remains significant even in some of America's urban areas, but it is especially important in rural communities where there are few other high-wage jobs. Basic industries such as forest products also generate significant wealth both directly and far beyond the industry itself through a strong "economic multiplier." Given their location, productivity, and size, public forestlands often have a key role in timber production and employment throughout a state or region. Commercial timber harvest is widely recognized as an essential component of sustainable forestry and local communities near forests. The nearly 9 billion board feet reduction in harvesting on the National Forests between 1987 and 2011 is estimated to have cost approximately 90,000 direct jobs and (calculated using multipliers) 270,000 other jobs (Lippke and Mason 2005).

### Forest products are an important, sustainable resource

The United States is a net importer of wood products. In 2005, imports of wood and paper products as a share of domestic consumption rose to 30% (Howard et al. 2010a; 2010b). Since domestic demand for these products continues to rise, harvesting restrictions on public lands result in an increase in harvesting in other ownerships, regions, and countries, including many that have far less stringent environmental standards or are much less productive (i.e., more acres must be harvested for similar yields). The rising cost of forest products, partly due to restrictions that add to production costs and reduce market supplies, also increases the use of alternatives, such as steel, plastic, and concrete. These materials pale in comparison to forest products in terms of sustainability, i.e., none is regularly produced with less energy (Glover et al. 2002) from an active air pollution cleanser (trees) while also being exceptionally renewable, recyclable, and biodegradable. The substantial environmental impacts that arise indirectly from broad harvest restrictions are rarely considered in opinion polls or politically motivated policy decisions.

### Active management is widely needed

Where major concerns for other values are identified by site-specific assessments and collaborative planning, timber harvest can be locally restricted on public lands. In contrast, broad prohibitions provide no flexibility and do nothing to address concerns such as America's rapidly expanding forest health and wildfire hazards. Ironically, such prohibitions would trade manageable risks for the largely uncontrollable and violent forces of nature, with potentially far greater costs (e.g., Mason et al. 2006) and environmental damage to the values that are the focus of "protection." The large scope of this work makes commercial harvest an important tool and revenue source for management while also providing environmentally friendly products and economic benefits to local communities, including the extensive and resilient forests that attract both visitors and businesses.

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