1982

Resource Management Thrusts and Opportunities: Fish and Wildlife-A Fuller Dimension to Improved Resource Management

John B. Crowell, Jr.
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Published in TRANSACTIONS OF THE FORTY-SEVENTH NORTH AMERICAN WILDLIFE AND NATURAL RESOURCES CONFERENCE, ed. Kenneth Sabol (Washington, DC, 1982).

Resource Management Thrusts and Opportunities: Fish and Wildlife—A Fuller Dimension to Improved Resource Management

John B. Crowell, Jr.
Assistant Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, D.C.

It's nice to be back in Portland and to speak again in my own neck of the woods. It's a special pleasure to come back here for this important conference and to participate in this opening session. I welcome this opportunity to discuss our efforts to improve resource management on the national forests and how our major thrusts will affect the fish and wildlife resource in particular.

It has been a little more than a year since President Reagan was inaugurated, and a little less time than that since I was confirmed and sworn in as assistant secretary of agriculture. We have moved to establish and implement some changed emphases in our resource management programs. So, by now there should be little mistake about our intent to improve natural resource management on the national forests. We intend to increase the productivity of these resources without corresponding increases in federal appropriations. We intend to generate increased receipts to the U.S. Treasury by emphasizing revenue-producing activities such as timber management and oil, gas, and minerals development outside of wilderness areas. We intend that the users pay more of the cost of services that traditionally have been subsidized or provided free of charge. We intend to foster compatibility among resource uses by avoiding land management practices that promote single uses to the detriment of other multiple uses. Those are our major thrusts for improving the way national forest resources are managed.

Many of our initiatives in these areas are well known. Some have created controversy, and critics have greeted a few with a high level of rhetoric that has left the public with little understanding of the true dimensions of our programs for the national forests. I hope this panel, and this conference, can provide some understanding of where we truly stand with our management objectives for the national forests.

Our priorities are quite clear—more fully to use the timber resources of the national forests for this generation, to manage the timber so that future generations can enjoy even greater bounty, and to encourage development of the timber, oil, gas, and mineral resources that are so plentiful on the public lands. Those priorities are precisely where they must be, given the overwhelming need to reduce the federal budget, to get America's economy once again on-track, and to get Americans back to work.

Additionally, our initiatives in resource management are directed at the broad array of resources on the national forests—not timber, minerals, oil, and gas alone. We are working to improve integrated management of all the forest's resources—fish and wildlife, rangelands, recreation, and wilderness together. Our fish and wildlife programs are a very important part of that effort. Consistent with this, our 1983 fish and wildlife budget proposal for the Forest Service reflects a million-

dollar increase above the 1981 appropriation—making it the only major federal fish and wildlife program to remain relatively unscathed in budget reductions. I have also established a fish and wildlife committee—made up of some of the top fish and wildlife experts in the U.S. Department of Agriculture—to advise me and to help me ensure a wise fish and wildlife policy integrated with the multiple use requirements of the national forests. The fish and wildlife resource is a major consideration.

Old-Growth

One of my major initiatives has been to speed up harvest of the slow-growing or decadent, overmature timber stands in the Pacific Northwest—the old-growth. Simply put, this old-growth offers the greatest immediate potential for increasing timber harvest from the national forests and for meeting the nation's wood needs in the short-term—over the next 20 to 40 years. This can be done at reasonable cost—so that returns to the treasury are likely to be high—while meeting multiple use needs and increasing the productivity of the national forests as well.

That said, let me make three points about this initiative:

First, we recognize that these older timber stands provide optimum or preferred habitat for several wildlife species—as well as aesthetic values—and that we therefore need to retain an old-growth component for multiple use purposes.

Second, we aren't going to be "liquidating" the national forests through this effort, as some are charging—we don't plan to come even close to cutting all of the old-growth stands in the Pacific Northwest.

And third, we intend to manage old-growth components on the national forests in areas large enough and well-enough distributed to sustain viable populations of species that need old-growth habitat.

We Will Consider Fish and Wildlife Habitat Needs

We intend to recognize fish and wildlife habitat requirements in developing forest management prescriptions for the old-growth. For example, we are identifying and managing habitat to meet the recovery objectives of the bald eagle—habitat which includes an old-growth component. Having started here in the Pacific Northwest, and now nationwide, we are identifying the relationships between wildlife habitat and other forest values, to better predict the consequences of management alternatives on fish and wildlife. That will equip forest managers for making better-informed and balanced resource management decisions and for avoiding or mitigating the negative consequences for wildlife and fish.

One of the problems we face in doing this for many wildlife species is that we don't know enough about the habitat role of old-growth stands, or whether younger stands can help fulfill this role. We are trying to address this problem with a 5-year research program for managing old-growth with wildlife habitats. This program will involve forests west of the Cascades, from Canada to northern California. It will identify plants and animals which depend on old growth, or find their optimum habitat there, and try to determine their biological requirements. It will describe, inventory, and classify old-growth ecosystems and will evaluate different ways of managing old-growth stands.

This is an effort that involves the Forest Service and other federal agencies; the forestry and fish and game agencies of Oregon, Washington and California; several universities; the forest industry; and several interested wildlife groups. We hope that this program will shortly provide the knowledge we need for informed, responsible management of the old-growth stands—management which can help us maintain viable populations of wildlife species, while integrating their additional habitat needs with sound silvicultural practices.

We Aren't Running Out of Old-Growth

Let's turn to my second point—that we aren't going to liquidate all the old-growth forests. There are 4.5 million acres of commercial forest land on the west-side national forests of Oregon and Washington that have timber stands over rotation age. These acres make up nearly two-thirds of the commercial forest land on those west-side forests, and their timber is a valuable resource with great potential for the regional and national economy. Of those 4.5 million acres, 2.4 million acres are in stands over 250 years old, and from which less than 10 percent of the timber has been removed. That is about a quarter of the area of those national forests. On top of that, there's some old-growth on private lands and on lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management. In spite of the clear need to accelerate harvest rates of the stands now over rotation age, it will take decades to work through this old-growth—and we plan to always retain an old-growth component.

In addition to the commercial old-growth already described, there's still a great deal more that's protected in research areas, in designated wilderness areas, and in national parks and similar forested areas that have been legislatively withdrawn from timber harvest. Olympic, Mount Rainier, North Cascades, Crater Lake and Redwood national parks all have large expanses of old-growth. In the national parks and national forests of the Pacific Northwest, there are about 2.7 million acres of Douglas-fir forest cover in existing or proposed wilderness alone—and most of this is old-growth. All of this old growth on non-commercial lands will also help meet the habitat needs of wildlife species preferring late-successional forest cover. Altogether, we are in no danger of running out of old-growth, and never will be.

We Will Manage Old-Growth to Maintain Viable Wildlife Populations

My third point on the old-growth is that we will manage the wildlife as one of many important resources in these stands. The Forest Service is well along with forest planning under the requirements of the National Forest Management Act of 1976. As the Forest Service plans the management of each national forest, it will plan to retain and manage an old-growth component that—at a minimum—will be adequate to ensure viable populations of the species which need old-growth. The planning process will also test alternatives that retain amounts of old-growth above that minimum. It will identify these alternative levels, not only for wildlife habitat, but for all the various values these stands provide—including timber. And it will evaluate the financial tradeoffs for each alternative. In that way, we can determine the best long-term approach for managing the old-growth.

We have recently proposed some changes in the regulations that govern this planning process on each of the national forests. Though most of our revisions have been editorial—reducing complexity, jargon, and redundancy—we have also used our experience with the process to make some substantive improvements. However, there has been some concern that our proposed changes will lead to forest plans that are designed to increase timber management at the expense of population viability for several wildlife or fish species.

This is not the case. What we are trying to do is to increase the land manager's flexibility in meeting fish and wildlife management objectives on the ground, and thereby do a better job of resource management. For example, the National Forest Management Act requires that the forest planning regulations "provide for diversity of plant and animal communities based on suitability and capability of the specific land area in order to meet overall multiple use objectives." In enacting this language, Congress intended that the habitat objectives would be established in the planning process and then followed on the ground by land managers. However, the foggy wording of the existing planning regulations implies that forest managers cannot alter the habitat of existing species, and that the existing habitat is to be maintained regardless of the cost and of the benefits foregone. We have tried to clarify this to conform with the law and in order to ensure the land manager's flexibility to manage the land area for all resource values.

Had we not done this, it could become quite difficult to do anything on the national forests without appearing to violate the regulations in some form. Even to do nothing could appear to violate these regulations if it would result in successional changes in the plant community that are detrimental to any management indicator species.

For example, consider a management indicator species that requires early succession, such as the Roosevelt elk. Given the principles of natural succession—that young growth matures and eventually becomes old growth—our failure periodically to interrupt the results of this plant succession, as nature commonly does by fire, would adversely affect elk populations.

Yet, managing for the elk could diminish habitat for the spotted owl—another management indicator species. Either way would appear to violate the existing planning regulations.

That illustrates why these particular changes to the regulations were necessary. The revised regulations will still require that all planning alternatives, as a minimum, provide for retention and management of habitat sufficient to maintain viable populations of the wildlife. This constitutes direction that's still more explicit than the statute itself, and which is more specific in the protections afforded fish and wildlife.

Since we published these revised regulations for public comment, we have received some constructive suggestions on how they can be further improved, and we expect to receive more before the public comment period closes on April 23, 1982. Through the revised regulations, in whatever form they take, wildlife and fish considerations will remain an essential part of forest planning. The 1983 proposed budget for wildlife and fish confirms that.

Let's look at how this forest planning system might work with the northern spotted owl, which is representative of the many wildlife species that find optimum habitat in the old-growth. Current information tentatively indicate that owl pairs

may need as much as 300 acres of old-growth around the nest, and perhaps another 700 acres of old-growth within one and one-half miles. This information also suggests that nesting sites should be less than 12 miles apart to ensure adequate distribution of adult birds.

Right now, on the National Forests of Oregon and Washington, we have enough old-growth to provide habitat for 1,365 pairs of owls on a nesting interval of 2 miles. In its draft regional plan, the Forest Service is proposing a goal to retain an old-growth component sufficient to support at least 375 pairs of owls. And, through the planning process on each forest, it will evaluate alternatives which would retain and manage enough old-growth to sustain population levels well above that minimum. One part of this evaluation is an analysis of the financial tradeoffs in retaining this old-growth habitat.

Planners on the Siskiyou National Forest, for example, are testing alternatives which provide old-growth habitat sufficient to support owl populations ranging from a minimum of 31 pairs, up to 50 pairs. For each alternative, they have determined the average annual cost—in terms of the timber values foregone—when old-growth habitat is set aside.

For example, preliminary data indicates the Siskiyou can retain enough old-growth for 31 pairs of owls at a fairly reasonable opportunity cost, primarily because the forest can sustain 23 owl-pairs in designated wilderness—where the calculations assume no timber values. Supporting a higher population level of 40 pairs of owls, however, would increase this opportunity cost substantially. On one of the forests east of the Cascades, the planners have tentatively estimated that the average timber opportunity cost of providing habitat sufficient to support a maximum 12 pairs of owls is more than $100,000 per pair, annually.

Whatever population level is ultimately sustained, the habitat will be distributed throughout the existing range of the species, so that the owls can interact with others. Forest plans, once implemented, will be monitored to ensure that they are achieving the anticipated results, and to make whatever adjustments might be needed.

In practice, some of the planning alternatives considered by the national forest planning teams may call for more habitat for some selected species than exists now. For example, one forest plan alternative must address the long-term goals established through RPA—which, for fish and wildlife, call for significant increases in elk, anadromous fish and many other species. Correspondingly, some alternatives may provide less habitat than now exists. These alternatives will be evaluated according to many different criteria, including their social and financial impacts, the goods and services they produce, and their overall protection and enhancement of the environment. As for how the fisheries and wildlife resource will fare in that sort of analysis, let me suggest that manipulating tree cover is usually too expensive to justify for wildlife purposes alone. We can do direct habitat improvement work, but biologists will buy more mileage for many wildlife species when the habitat management efforts for those species can be integrated with other resource programs.

For example, consider a management area on the Winema National Forest, near Klamath Falls, Oregon. Last year, this area contained 16 bald eagle nests—seven of them active. There are also at least two pairs of spotted owls, some wetlands, habitat for several other wildlife species and significant timber values within the

management area. It used to be that, for bald eagle nests, the silviculturists would draw a 300-acre circle around the nest, and stay out of it. But biologists know more about the eagle's habitat requirements now; they know the specific old-growth characteristics the eagles prefer.

So, the biologists and silviculturists on the Winema have devised a combination of silvicultural methods to sustain or increase the number of eagles on the area, maintain the habitat for spotted owls and other wildlife, protect the aesthetics and ensure perpetual yields of timber, too.

Though it's not accurate to say that "good timber management is always good wildlife management," let's admit that neither is it all negative. Whether timber management is good or bad for wildlife and fish depends a lot on how well the biologists and silviculturists can work together. Twenty years ago Robert H. Giles told this conference that "the time has come to face up to the fact that the harvest of wood, a forester's function, has greater influence on wildlife than any active technique available to the wildlifer. In one sale a forester can influence more cover over a longer time than a wildlife manager can create in a decade. The wildlifer, realizing the potentials of the wood harvest, must not only increase the effectiveness of his present practices, but must provide guidance for foresters so their efforts will not so strongly negate his efforts and can be made to complement them."

As I close, let me say that you can help—and we want your help—in our efforts to improve management on the national forests. Our priorities are clear, but our initiatives are directed at the broad array of resources on these forests. We are working to improve the integrated management of those resources together. Your help with the fish and wildlife resources can lend a fuller dimension to our efforts.