

# Environmentalists must step back and let professionals manage timber

By **STEVE HENSON**  
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The recent Bush administration proposal to sell parcels of national forest lands to help fund legislation designed to help rural communities cope with dramatic declines in federal revenue sharing has suddenly captured our attention. Editorial boards and environmentalists decry it to be selling off our natural heritage. Ironically, it is the mainstream media and environmental extremists who created this dilemma in the first place.

For the past two decades, well-funded environmental groups have orchestrated media campaigns and demonstrations, mounted tenacious legal challenges and lobbied every level of government to stop timber harvesting on national forests. With few exceptions, major media outlets have sided with them and portrayed them as saviors of our forests. These relentless attacks have been quite successful in reducing the timber sale program by 85 percent across the nation.

National forests, as opposed to national parks, originally were established by Congress in 1897 with the passage of the Organic Act. This act authorized the establishment of national forests for two purposes — watershed protection and providing a continuous supply of timber for our country. Every piece of legislation addressing national forest management passed by Congress since the Organic Act explicitly points out that it does not change the original intent of national forests.

In 1908, recognizing the need to share federal revenues from tax-exempt federal lands with local communities, Congress wisely ordered that 25 percent of timber sale receipts from the federal timber program go back to the counties where the timber was sold. These monies could be used only for county roads or schools.

Congress passed the Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self-Determination Act in 2000 to help struggling county school systems faced with massive loss of anticipated federal revenue sharing. Some Western states have been severely impacted where counties with dominant federal ownership saw millions of dollars annually drop to nothing. The law allowed for each county that received the traditional 25 percent fund money to choose between continuing the traditional program or selecting a guaranteed payment each year based on a formula included in the bill.

The act has a sunset date this year, as Congress thought timber sale revenues would be climbing back toward traditional levels. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened, mainly because of continuing litigation battles with environmentalists and the U.S. Forest Service's loss of expertise in preparing timber sales.

Currently, Congress is contemplating the reauthorization of this law for another six years to give the Forest Service time to get its act together and address activist judges' environmental law rulings that are hampering scientific management of our public lands. The law has broad bipartisan support in both houses confirmed by the lists of cosponsors.

We wouldn't be having this debate over selling these lands if environmental groups, with the ardent support of the news media, hadn't politicized the management of our national forests and thrown more than a hundred years of science-based stewardship out the window.

Sadly, the same affected rural counties, particularly in the West, also have been devastated by the loss of timber-related industries and jobs, creating more financial woes for struggling counties to make ends meet.

The editorial boards and environmental extremists say we should support these rural counties and schools but not through the sale of public lands. I'm reminded of the adage — when you point a finger, see how many are pointing back at you.

The answer is simple. Get the environmental extremists off the back of the U.S. Forest Service and let the professionals manage them as Congress has directed over the past century. It will resolve the revenue-sharing issue, improve the health of our forests and provide countless jobs for our rural communities.

Steve Henson is executive director of the Southern Appalachian Multiple Use Council in Waynesville, N.C., [www.samuc.org](http://www.samuc.org), and a member of the board of directors of the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition in Red Bluff, Calif., [www.forestco.tcde.tehama.k12.ca.us/](http://www.forestco.tcde.tehama.k12.ca.us/). His email address is [shenson1@earthlink.net](mailto:shenson1@earthlink.net).

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