

## Lands are part of heritage and should be preserved

By DAVID MUHLY  
March 26, 2006

Public lands are a threatened entity. We have a finite amount of public land available for habitat protection, hunting, fishing, hiking and other recreation. Less and less is available for purchase, and given the encroachment of development, we're unlikely to add much more. And once it's gone, it's gone.

Which bring us to the latest proposal by the Bush administration to sell off our national forests to pay for funding for rural schools. Feb. 28 marked the beginning of a 30-day public comment period on the president's proposal as part of his budget request to Congress that the Secure Rural Schools Act be funded for only an additional five years by the sale of up to 300,000 acres of national forest land across the country, ostensibly parcels that are isolated from contiguous forest, difficult to manage or already designated as available for trade in national forest plans.

Designers of this program, including former two-decade timber industry lobbyist Undersecretary of Agriculture Mark Rey, say these sales represent only a small part of the entire Forest Service's 193,000,000 acres. That's true, and my fingernails are just a small percentage of my body, but I'd hate for someone to yank them out.

We're told these lands are small parcels that are disconnected from other U.S. Forest Service lands, not of high quality or are difficult to manage. One parcel in Virginia, however, is 920 acres and another is contiguous with existing national forest land — with about 12,000 acres of it, in fact.

Elsewhere, the tracts identified for sale include Wild and Scenic River Special Areas in the Uwharrie National Forest in North Carolina, areas of high scenic integrity in Virginia, lakefront property in Mississippi and trailhead land in the West. One wonders if the motivation behind these sales has as much to do with an ongoing attempt to privatize the public trust as it is to provide funding for rural schools. Whether large or small, these lands are all a part of America's natural heritage, and they should be preserved as a legacy for our children and grandchildren.

Neo-conservative Grover Norquist, strategist for Bush administration policies, has announced his intent to reduce the size of the federal government to a size that it could be "drowned in a bathtub." Evidently, this includes drowning everything public, including public health, public education, public welfare and also public lands. All go down the drain.

Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth has repeatedly identified the loss of open space as one of the four main threats to forest health in this country, and yet this proposal would eliminate more. From the U.S. Forest Service Web site:

"More than 21.8 million acres of open space were lost to development between 1982 and 1997, about 4,000 acres per day, 3 acres a minute. Of this loss, close to 10.3 million acres are in forestland. It continues today."

This proposal would add 75 days' worth of loss by that calculation. If you factor in the additional 500,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management lands on the block, you can add another 125 days. That's almost seven months' worth of open space loss, and most of this is forestland.

Since this proposal was announced, editorial opinion across the country has come out in opposition to it, and lawmakers have been either in opposition or silent. Legislators from both sides of the aisle have voiced opposition to the proposal and are examining alternative funding mechanisms for the program. Within the agency, Forest Service officials are generally — though quietly — opposed to the project, in no small measure because of the way this was developed from the top down.

And there's nothing equitable about this plan, either. North Carolina could stand to lose about 10,000 acres and see \$1 million in return, while Oregon would get \$162.8 million for selling a similar number of acres.

We as a society need to make sure that rural counties that have substantial acreage in public lands are assured that the tax revenues they would otherwise receive if these lands were in the tax base be accommodated. Funding should come from the Treasury rather than providing billions of dollars of tax cuts to the upper 1 percent of wealthiest Americans or billions in subsidies to the oil industry, with record hundreds of billions of dollars in profits in 2005. Most recently, the Interior Department decided to allow oil and gas producers to forgo an estimated \$7 billion in royalty payments over the next five years, money that should go to the U.S. Treasury.

Budget shortfalls should be met with continuing funding resolutions rather than by cannibalizing our public trust for this and future generations to support short-sighted fiscal irresponsibility.

Oh, and though my toenails are not necessarily high quality and may be difficult to manage, I'd like to keep them, too.

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