

1 **DRAFT January 28, 2007**

2 **Timber Harvesting on Federal & Other Public Lands:**  
3 **An Essential Tool for Sustaining Forests & Communities**

4 Initially adopted by the Society of American Foresters on December 9, 2001 and XXX. It shall expire on XXX unless, after subsequent  
5 review, it is decided otherwise by Council.

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7 **Position**  
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9 The Society of American Foresters supports commercial and non-commercial timber harvesting  
10 as an appropriate objective and primary tool for maintaining healthy and sustainable forests on  
11 federal and other public lands. Most of these lands are governed by laws and other policies that  
12 allow or mandate sustainable timber harvest with appropriate resource management planning.  
13 However, on federal lands, harvest levels remain insufficient to maintain forest health, reduce  
14 hazardous fuels to limit wildfire risks, and provide important economic benefits and community  
15 sustainability. Where fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, or recreation is a priority, timber  
16 harvest can be compatible and even promote these values when carefully planned and supervised  
17 by professional foresters and other resource specialists. The use of renewable, recyclable, and  
18 biodegradable forest products from many public lands is imperative given our nation's increasing  
19 resource needs and sustainability concerns.  
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22 **Issue**  
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24 For many decades, timber harvesting on federal and other public lands in the United States has  
25 been an important source of socioeconomic benefits as well as a key tool for professional  
26 foresters to meet diverse resource management objectives. However, policy and budget  
27 restrictions have greatly reduced public timber harvests in recent years, especially on federal  
28 lands. For example, harvests on our National Forests declined by 84% between 1986 and 2001,  
29 i.e., from 21.2 to 3.4 billion board feet (bbf; Smith et al. 2004). This is far below the long-term,  
30 sustainable capability of these lands (12.2 bbf), and well under targets (7.6 bbf) set by newer  
31 management plans that integrated major resource protection measures (Fedkiw 1998). These  
32 harvest reductions have greatly impacted the socioeconomic well-being of many forest-  
33 dependent communities, and also have contributed to growing wildfire hazards as biomass  
34 accumulates on millions of acres.  
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36 Despite such concerns, some groups and political leaders continue to advocate major restrictions  
37 or even total bans on commercial timber harvest on public forestlands. Supporting arguments  
38 focus on environmental risks and the view that commercial activity on public forests is  
39 inappropriate, costly, and simply benefits large corporations. Some opinion polls and prior  
40 policy decisions to limit harvest on public lands are cited as evidence of support for such  
41 restrictions. However, increasing forest health and wildfire problems in many public forests  
42 where harvesting has been greatly reduced suggest that further restrictions may simply  
43 exacerbate forest resource and socioeconomic concerns in affected areas. Similarly, demands for  
44 forest products continue to increase, and environmental impacts from the use of alternative  
45 materials or imported products can be significant.  
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48 **Background**  
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50 **Our public forestlands are very extensive and productive**

51 The United States has approximately 319 million acres of forestlands in public ownership (Smith et al.  
52 2004), an area comparable to nearly all of the states in the Eastern Time Zone. About a quarter (77  
53 million acres) of these lands has been designated as wilderness areas, parks, and other major reserves  
54 where harvest of commercial products is normally prohibited. However, nearly half (147 million  
55 acres) of our public forestland can grow wood products for commercial use; this represents about 29%  
56 of such land in the United States and includes some of the most productive forests in the world. About  
57 110 million acres of these productive forestlands are in federal ownership, and 37 million acres are  
58 state, county, and municipal lands. Given the scope and productivity of America's public forests and  
59 their diverse uses and values, policies that significantly impact the harvest of commercial products can  
60 have broad effects that range from local to global.

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

63 The 147 million acres of unreserved, productive public forestlands in the United States have been  
64 established and managed under laws that typically allow or mandate sustainable commercial harvests.  
65 For example, the Organic Act of 1897 directs federal forest managers "to improve and protect the  
66 forest, ... [secure] favorable conditions of water flows, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber for  
67 the use and necessities of the citizens of the U.S." Such laws also direct a significant proportion of the  
68 revenue from such harvests to local governments. Similarly, many state and local policies require that  
69 public forestlands be managed to produce sustainable revenues to counties, schools, and local taxing  
70 districts. In addition, state laws requiring prompt reforestation and maintenance of forestland  
71 productivity directly promote the sustainability of forest resource benefits.

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73 **Evolving policies and practices protect other values**

74 Most arguments to prohibit commercial timber harvest on public lands are based on inaccurate  
75 generalizations about environmental impacts and an unwarranted vilification of economic enterprises.  
76 Timber harvest planning and practices have improved greatly in recent decades and continue to  
77 respond to both evolving knowledge and public concerns and laws for protecting diverse resource  
78 values. On federal lands, directives such as the Northwest Forest Plan focus on conservation of  
79 important fish and wildlife habitat. On state forest lands, in addition to other regulatory requirements,  
80 updated management plans often prescribe measures to maintain or improve habitat for key species.  
81 Such directives typically restrict harvest in sensitive areas and add to the costs of operations on public  
82 lands. However, economical harvest usually is possible with careful planning and when extensive  
83 delays from intentionally obstructive legal appeals or unlawful protests are avoided.

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85 **Commercial harvest is a key management tool**

86 America's forests are constantly changing. Trees and other vegetation grow, shed branches and  
87 foliage, and die from crowding or insect or disease infestations. This dynamic nature of our forests  
88 makes timber harvest an important management tool for both forest products and other values. On  
89 both federal and state lands, teams of professional foresters and other resource specialists carefully plan  
90 and supervise harvests to protect or enhance diverse resource values. Important work such as  
91 improvements to fish habitat, recreational areas, and roads are facilitated by the income, equipment,  
92 and skilled personnel made available by local commercial operations. Resource professionals  
93 recognize that harvest plans must vary widely among diverse management areas and objectives. No  
94 single, simple strategy fits all.

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96 **Economic benefits are large and broad**

97 Commercial timber harvests provide significant economic benefits, including helping to pay for  
98 management for diverse values. America's forest products industry generates substantial income and  
99 employs about 1.7 million workers, a level comparable to the nation's auto and truck service and repair  
100 industry (US Census Bureau 2006). Forest products employment remains significant even in some of  
101 America's urban areas, but it is especially important in rural communities where other high-wage jobs

102 are few. Basic industries like forest products also generate significant wealth both directly and far  
103 beyond the industry itself through a strong “economic multiplier.” Given their location, productivity,  
104 and size, public forestlands often have a key role in timber production and employment throughout a  
105 state or region, even where other values are emphasized. Commercial timber harvest is widely  
106 recognized as an essential component of sustainable forestry and local communities near forests.  
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### 108 **Forest products are an important, sustainable resource**

109 Overall, the United States is a net importer of wood products (Shifley 2006). And because domestic  
110 demand for these products continues to rise, major harvest restrictions on public land result in an  
111 increase in harvesting in other ownerships, regions, and countries, including many that have far less  
112 stringent environmental standards or are much less productive (i.e., more acres must be harvested for  
113 similar yields). The rising cost of forest products, partly due to restrictions that add to production costs  
114 and reduce market supplies, also increases the use of alternatives such as steel, plastic, and concrete.  
115 These materials pale in comparison to forest products in terms of fundamental sustainability, i.e., none  
116 is regularly produced with less energy (Glover et al. 2002) from an active air pollution cleanser (trees)  
117 while also being exceptionally renewable, recyclable, and biodegradable. The substantial  
118 environmental impacts that arise indirectly from broad harvest restrictions are rarely considered in  
119 opinion polls or politically motivated policy decisions.  
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### 121 **Active management is widely needed**

122 Where major concerns for other values are identified by site-specific assessments and collaborative  
123 planning, timber harvest can be locally restricted on public lands. In contrast, broad prohibitions  
124 provide no flexibility and do nothing to address such serious concerns as America’s rapidly expanding  
125 forest health and wildfire hazards. Ironically, such prohibitions would trade manageable risks for the  
126 largely uncontrollable and violent forces of nature, with potentially far greater costs (e.g., Mason et al.  
127 2006) and environmental damage to the values that are the focus of “protection.” Former Oregon  
128 Governor John Kitzhaber, his fellow western governors, and the General Accounting Office (a major  
129 federal agency that conducts nonpartisan analyses) are among the notable leaders that have studied and  
130 stressed the need for very extensive active management to reduce these widespread forest health and  
131 wildfire problems. The large scope of this work makes commercial harvest an important tool and  
132 revenue source for management while also providing environmentally friendly products and economic  
133 benefits to local communities, including the healthy, fire-resistant forests that attract both visitors and  
134 businesses.  
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