

**The nation's forest chief warns of four threats to our forests: Timber cutting, road building no longer agency's primary mission**

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U.S. Forest Service Director Dale Bosworth talks Friday during a luncheon of the Idaho Environmental Forum in Boise.

Fire and fuels Of the 20 million acres of national forest in Idaho, 5.5 million acres are so loaded with trees and brush from lack of fire that they are at a high risk of burning in giant fires that could destroy water quality, wildlife habitat and the forest's historic composition. Another 9.8 million acres are under serious but not extreme threat.

Invasive species Alien plants such as cheatgrass, above, yellow star thistle, Rush skeletonweed and spotted knapweed and diseases such as white pine blister rust threaten to change ecosystems across Idaho.

Loss of open space Ranchers who are unable to meet the stricter regulations on national forests to protect clean water and rangeland, are forced to sell their private holdings, often along rivers and in prime wildlife habitat, for subdivisions and other development.

Unmanaged motorized recreation Thousands of miles of new trails have been pioneered across Idaho's public lands by the exploding popularity of motorized recreation, especially all-terrain vehicles.

Registration has grown from 6,322 off-road users in 1985 to 68,521 in 2002.

Rocky Barker

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U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth told employees Friday how to help him rebuild trust in the agency as they set up a thinning program to reduce the threat of fire.

"I want people to be darned sure it's a fuels treatment project and not a timber sale project cloaked up," Bosworth said at the Idaho Environmental Forum.

The University of Idaho graduate in charge of managing 191 million acres of national forest was in Boise as part of his campaign to change the way people look at the Forest Service and the problems it faces in the future.

No longer, he said, does the agency consider timber cutting and road building its primary mission.

The new threats to the nation's forests are fuel buildup and fires, motorized recreation, the loss of open space and invasive alien species.

"It's time to stop fighting those old battles from the past," Bosworth said. "The wars have been fought and won 15 years ago."

The timber harvest on national forest lands has dropped from about 11.5 billion board feet in 1989 to about 2 billion board feet today, enough to built 133,000 homes. The agency has eliminated 10,000 miles of road since 2001 and built only 900 miles of new roads.

Leftover from the polarizing debates over the size and scope of timber cutting is a lack of trust the agency must overcome if it is to be successful, Bosworth said. Congress and President George Bush have cleared away many of the institutional obstacles that Bosworth had characterized as "analysis paralysis."

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act approved last year by Congress allows more timber and brush to be cut and cleared with less environmental scrutiny. So did administrative actions promoted by the Bush administration.

#### Fire and Fuels

Now Bosworth hopes to increase the speed with which the Forest Service treats the more than 73 million acres of national forest and nearby communities threatened by wildfire. Critics have charged the new rules reduce the public involvement in the decisions of how and where to thin, log and burn forests.

Instead, Bosworth is challenging his employees to get the public involved early to help shape the program. "I want people to engage the public better than we have in the past," he said.

Boise attorney Bernie Zaleha, a member of the board of directors of the Sierra Club, one of the nation's most powerful environmental groups, remains skeptical that the Forest Service's intent is fuels treatment and not timber sales.

He said a 518,000-board feet timber salvage sale in Southwest Oregon, where the Biscuit Fire burned in 2001, is an example of a timber sale disguised as a fuels reduction project.

"If what he said was true, they would not be doing the Biscuit sale in the name of fuels reduction," Zaleha said.

#### Invasive species

Bosworth's second threat is invasive species. He pointed to the spread of spotted knapweed in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, the killing of 95 percent of Idaho's western white pine by blister rust and the loss of wildlife habitat from yellow star thistle as examples of a slow but insidious destroyers of public lands.

"These invasives could have more effect on biodiversity than anything else going on," Bosworth said.

#### Loss of open space

The third threat, he said, is the loss of open space. The threat to the national forests is the fragmentation of important wildlife habitat and such impacts as the spread of invasive species.

The agency contributes to this loss, he said, when it forces ranchers off the land in their efforts to prevent damage to watersheds and range from grazing. He said the agency needs to find ways to restore the health of the land without destroying the rancher's business.

"We need creative new solutions," he said.

Ted Hoffman, a former president of the Idaho Cattle Association, a rancher and veterinarian, applauded Bosworth's recognition that the agency has needlessly hurt ranchers.

"That's a profound comment," he said.

#### Motorized recreation

The fourth threat, Bosworth said, is unmanaged motorized recreation.

He is telling every national forest to force motorized users to stick to roads and trails.

"The day we can take off-highway vehicles cross-country across the national forests are over," he said.

Bosworth has the support of the organized motorized

recreation community for this, said Bill Dart, executive director of the Blue Ribbon Coalition, a national group based in Pocatello dedicated to motorized access on public lands.

"We support limiting use to roads and trails on most places on the national forests," Dart said.

He pointed to an initiative by the Boise, Payette and Sawtooth national forests that would ban all cross-country motorized travel. Officials of the three forests will allow travel to continue on all current routes. Then the Forest Service will do a local review of all routes to see which ones are appropriate.

"We think they're on the right track," Dart said.

Bosworth's success in restoring trust in the agency will come if people on the fringes of the debate, both on the environmental side and the development side, lose their appeal, said John Freemuth, a Boise State University political science professor.

"You'll see the people that oppose everything get marginalized," Freemuth said.

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