

## **Open Letter from the Former Chiefs of the Forest Service to all Members of Congress**

March 13, 2006

Dear Senators and Representatives:

We (the four living former Chiefs of the U. S. Forest Service) are writing you in regard to a proposal in the Administration's proposed budget to auction off \$800 million worth of national forest lands. The lands concerned comprise some 300,000 acres in numerous parcels that are isolated from the national forests proper. The receipts from this auction would be used to continue funding for "Secure Rural Schools Program" for an additional 5 years before it is phased out altogether.

It is a long-established custom to trade of such isolated parcels of national forest land for other lands that enhance the national forest system. In other words, there are isolated hard to manage parcels that should be in private ownership. Where feasible that should occur – but only when, in exchange, appropriate additions are made the National Forests.

The question of whether National Forest lands should be auctioned off to provide funding for another government program should be clearly separated from the question of what would be done with the "receipts" from such sales. It should be clearly recognized that such an action would establish a precedent contrary to that of the last 102 years and enacts a change to existing law which forbids such action.

The prime consideration is whether National Forest lands should be auctioned off for any for any other purpose beyond overall enhancement of the National Forest System? The coupling of a proposal for selling off public lands to fund other programs, no matter how worthwhile those programs, is a slippery slope that could, and likely would, be used to fund other worthwhile causes as time goes by and budgetary pressures increase. For that reason alone, we strongly recommend against taking this first step of auctioning off National Forest lands to pay for other government programs.

The Secure Rural Schools Program was, and is, worthwhile. It was designed to give counties which contain National Forest lands short term relief from the loss of a share of timber receipts that have declined precipitously in the early 1990s. Just when that program should be phased out – today or 5 years from now – is a question for Congress. The Administration's budget proposes sales of National Forest lands to provide some \$800 million to extend the program for 5 years. This would provide \$160 million per year (compared to \$40 million last year) for the program – an infinitesimally small portion of the overall federal budget. If the subsidy to public education in counties containing National Forest lands is to continue for another 5 years, we encourage you to explore other funding options.

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 amended Section 11 of the Forest and Rangelands Renewable Resources Act which says ... "no land now or hereafter reserved or withdrawn from the public domain as National Forests pursuant to the Act of March 3, 1891 or any act supplementary thereto... shall be returned to the public domain except by an act of Congress."

We believe that any “act of Congress” that makes such a dramatic change in the inviolability of status of National Forest lands should take place in the form of a formally introduced amendment to the existing legislation so that it would be openly considered by Congress in the form of hearings and debate. For the required “act of Congress” to be in the form of a few lines in a budget bill, while perhaps legal, is, in our opinion, not in keeping with the magnitude of potential long term consequences that could emanate from such action.

We believe that auctioning off National Forest lands, for any purpose beyond enhancement of the National Forests, is an unwise precedent. If it is to be done, such should occur only after the consideration of the change and the potential long-term consequences are fully debated and exposed to the owners of the National Forests – the American people.

Respectfully,

R. Max Peterson, Chief, U. S. Forest Service, 1979-1987

F. Dale Robertson, Chief, U. S. Forest Service, 1987-1993

Jack Ward Thomas, Chief, U. S. Forest Service, 1993-1996

Michael Dombeck, Chief Emeritus, U. S. Forest Service, 1997-2001