



Fire, Forests, and the Department of the Interior

This year, many parts of the United States are
being affected by fires.

You have seen the fire stories on the evening news and in the newspapers.



I'm here to talk to you about the story behind those headlines.

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The West is witnessing a record fire season. The entire Northeast has been clouded over with smoke from Canada's huge fires. Georgia experienced the largest fire in its state history. Kentucky has almost 900 wild fires this year. South Carolina has had more than 3000.

Glimpse of ruins 'heartbreaking'

■ Firefighters contain
5 percent of inferno

■ 2 crews diverted
from hopeful Show Low



The Interior Department manages more than 20 percent of the land in this Nation. Our lands are greater in size than the 25 smallest states put together.



We work closely with the Forest Service in the Department of Agriculture, which manages another 6 percent of the U.S. Their lands contain the bulk of the nation's forests, while Interior has fires affecting both forests and rangelands. Interior shoulders about one-third of the cost of the federal wildland fire fighting program.

We are at the beginning of a long, intense and damaging fire season.

More than 3 million acres have already burned. That is 1 million acres more than were burned at this time during the previous record year.



While fire is a natural part of a forest ecosystem, these fires are beyond natural.



Fires Are Burning Faster Than Ever Before

- **Arizona Rodeo Fire: 800 acres to 46,000 acres in one day - and eventually grew to more than 450,000**
- **Colorado Hayman Fire: five times bigger than the previous largest fire in Colorado history**



I flew over the Hayman fire, and talked to firefighters at the base camp. I saw its roaring flames, smelled its smoke, watched the fire bearing down on homes in its path.

That is as close to hell as I ever want to get.

Energy from a Large Fire Can Equal an Atomic Bomb



These unnatural fires cause serious damage. Energy from just one of these large fires can equal an atomic bomb.

Heat So Hot It Can Sterilize Soil



Their heat can sterilize soil,
preventing growth for years
to come.

Large Fires Cause Major Air and Particulate Pollution



The smoke that billows from these large fires raises air quality concerns. Let me give you one example. In 1999, the Big Bar fire in Northern California burned 125,000 acres. The smoke from that fire alone exceeded federal and state clean air standards for 22 days. Schools were closed for several days in Klamath and Trinity Counties. Smoke advisories were issued for people to remain indoors.

Thousands of Communities Near Federal Land Are At Risk from Fire



Already this year, 200 communities have been affected by wildland fires either through evacuation or, tragically, destruction of homes or businesses.

Wildland Firefighters Are Effective

We are attacking these fires, especially fires near communities.

- So far this year, 99.7% of fires are being controlled on the initial attack.
- Firefighters have already contained 343 large fires.
- They have saved dozens of communities.
- On July 10, 360 new fires started; only 3 became large fires



These firefighters are courageous. They work in 100 degree weather near fires burning at degrees in the hundreds. They climb rugged terrain carrying chainsaws and pulaskis. They dig fire lines, light backfires, drive fire engines to the fire's edge. Smoke jumpers even parachute in to the most difficult areas. We are grateful for the work they do.

More Resources Are Available

Funding is \$750 million above 2000.

One reason that our firefighters are effective is because more firefighting resources are available. Between the Interior Department and the Forest Service, the Bush Administration and bipartisan majorities of Congress have provided \$750 million more than the record fire year of 2000.



We have

- 4000 more firefighting personnel
- 377 more fire engines
- 56 more aircraft
- 47 more bulldozers

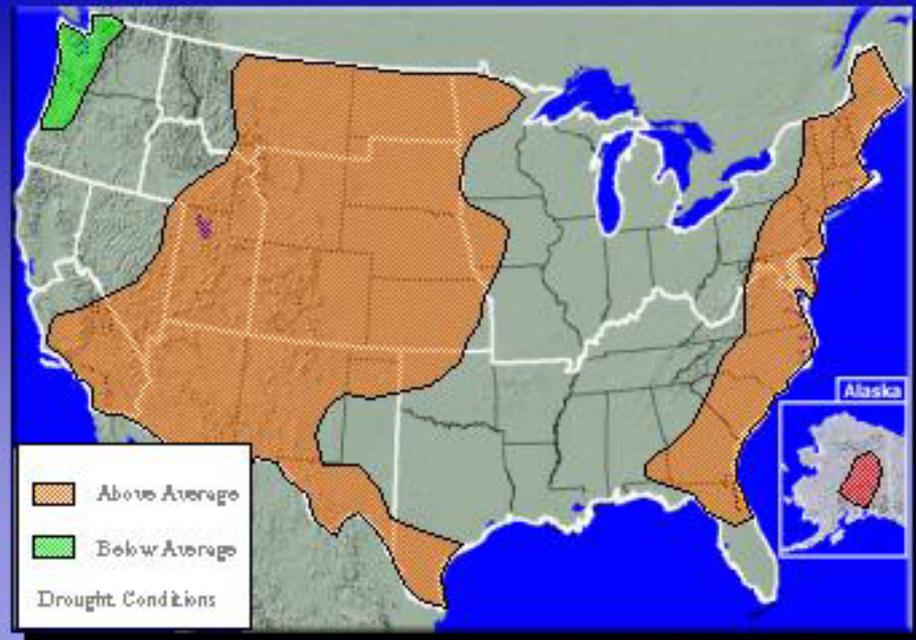


This year Interior and Agriculture are giving states and counties \$145 million in Federal fire fighting assistance like equipment and training. In addition, the Federal Emergency Management Administration is providing hundreds of millions of dollars to help state and local governments pay suppression costs.



Heroic fighting of fires after they start is not enough. We need to look at the root causes of our susceptibility to fire

Drought Areas In Red



One reason fires are burning hotter and faster this year is because of drought. Two-thirds of the Nation is experiencing drought, and many places are enduring the worst droughts of the last century. In fact the Colorado River watershed is at just 16 percent of its usual flow. In early June, northern New Mexico reported the snowpack there was an unbelievably low 2% of normal.

The western fire season doesn't usually even start until July 1st. This year, federal agencies declared the highest level of extreme fire emergency 6 weeks earlier than ever before.

But beyond the dryness is the forest density.

Let's Look At a Century of Forest Management...

Allow me to show you a series of remarkable photos that dramatically capture a century of forestry management. I think you'll agree that these photos paint a vivid picture.

The first photo was taken in 1871. It shows a picture of a cabin in what is now the Bitterroot National Forest in Montana. Note the evergreen trees and the open space.



1871 Bitterroot National Forest

The next photo was taken in 1980. Same cabin, same forest. Note the huge increase in number of trees and lack of open space. For a century we have been suppressing fires. This picture shows why experts say our western public land forests are 15 times denser than they were a hundred years ago.

Now in the year 2000, the cabin was moved. Shortly afterwards, a fire raced through the area. If the cabin had not been moved, it surely would have been destroyed.



1980

The next photo was taken 10 days ago. It shows blackened trees and no tree regeneration. There have been significant problems with erosion.



2002

As you can probably tell, I have a personal passion about the subject of restoring our forests to health. I grew up in Colorado, and most summer weekends my family would head to the mountains. I loved the Rockies, and spent countless hours in the outdoors.

This photo reminds me of the forests I remember as a youngster. The pines were tall and strong and surrounded by grassy areas.



But over the years, the trees became more dense. Stands like this one became more common. Today's forests are overly dense -- so trees are skinny and unhealthy.



Coloradoans began to notice more prevalent insect infestation and disease in the forests. Whole mountainsides turned from evergreen green to rust as pine needles succumbed, and then to grey as the trees themselves died.

This photo shows an area where huge stands of trees have suffered beetle kill. This is what forests increasingly look like today...dense, diseased and dying. These are tinder boxes just waiting to explode.



As I mentioned earlier, fire is an important part of healthy forest ecosystems. Sequoia trees, for example, regenerate through fire. This photo shows what natural fire behavior looks like. Fire stays close to the ground, doesn't move up trees and through the canopy. It takes out the brush and smaller trees, but leaves the large fire-resistant trees intact.



**Fire behavior
in a natural forest**

This photo shows what happens when fires explode in diseased and dying forests. Fire burns up trees, and spreads rapidly. Even centuries-old forest giants are destroyed.

Thomas Bonnicksen, a professor of forest science at Texas A&M, described today's catastrophic fires like this:

“Fires now look like battlefields when they burn. When a fire finally stops it leaves a desolated landscape scarred by erosion and pocked with craters that formed where tree roots burned. The blackened corpses of animals and fallen trees on the ground and standing dead trees formed the ghostly skeleton of the former forest. This is not natural.”



...fire behavior in a dense forest

A Problem That Took a Century To Create Will Not Be Solved Overnight



83% of Firefighters Say Their Biggest Safety Risks Are Dense Forests



Two-thirds of public lands are at moderate to high risk of catastrophic fire.

Rather than let our forests continue to deteriorate slowly, capped by huge fires, we need to change our management practices.

We have two tools available to us: prescribed fires and mechanical thinning. After all my talk about fighting fires, you may be surprised to hear me talking about deliberately setting fires – but a prescribed fire is done under carefully controlled circumstances. The weather must be appropriate, moisture content of the forest must be right, and fire crews must be standing by. Sometimes, if the conditions are right, we will also let a natural or accidental fire burn.

Prescribed burns are not always the answer. Obviously, they are not a good tool in forests dotted with homes. Even in some wild areas, the forests have become so dense that fires destroy all the trees, instead of just the small ones.

Thinning is a way of restoring natural density without fire risks or catastrophic fire in unusually dense forests. We go in with chain saws and remove smaller trees or trees that are too close together.

These photos were taken in South Dakota, and they show the difference between thinned and unthinned areas.



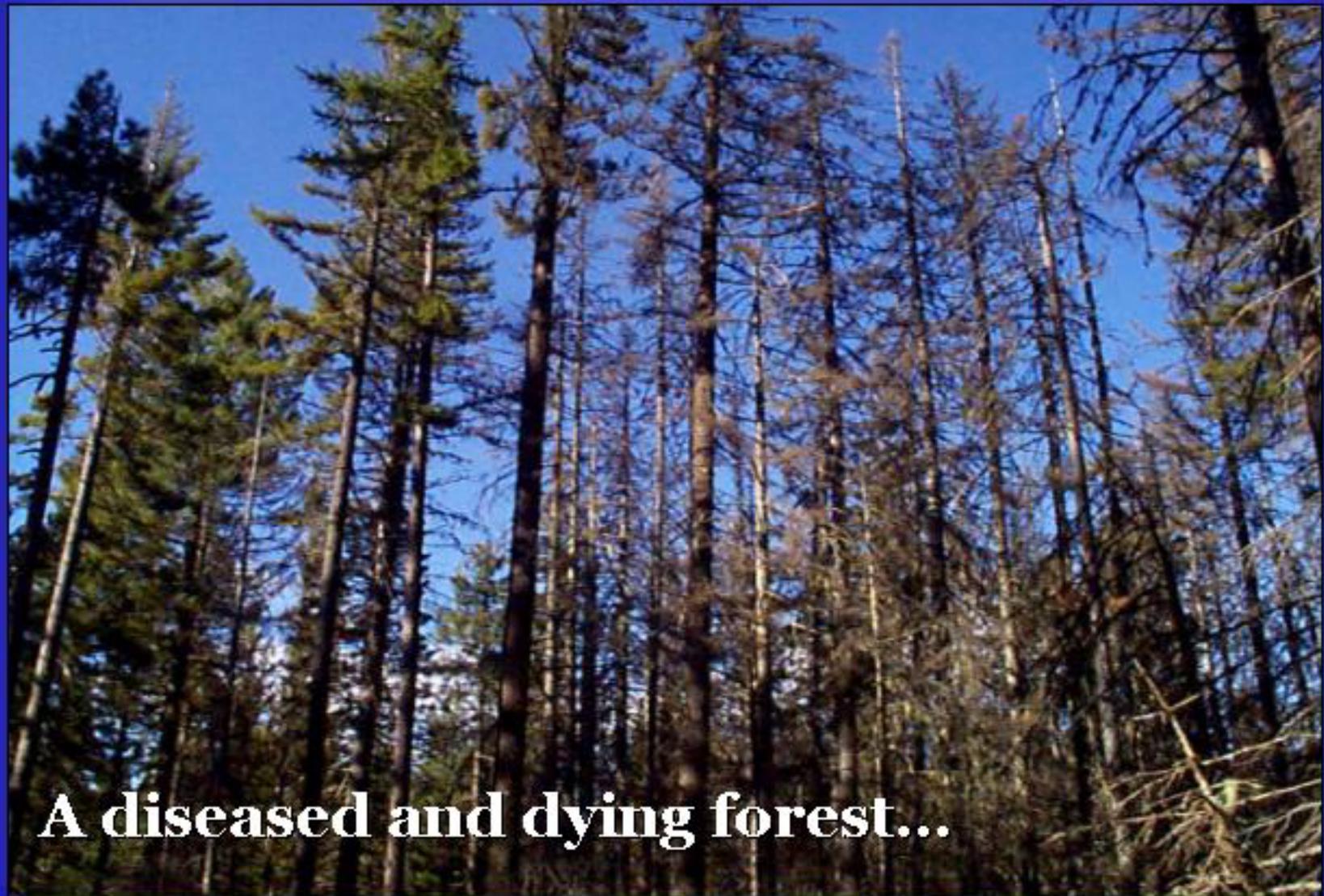
**Before
Treatment**



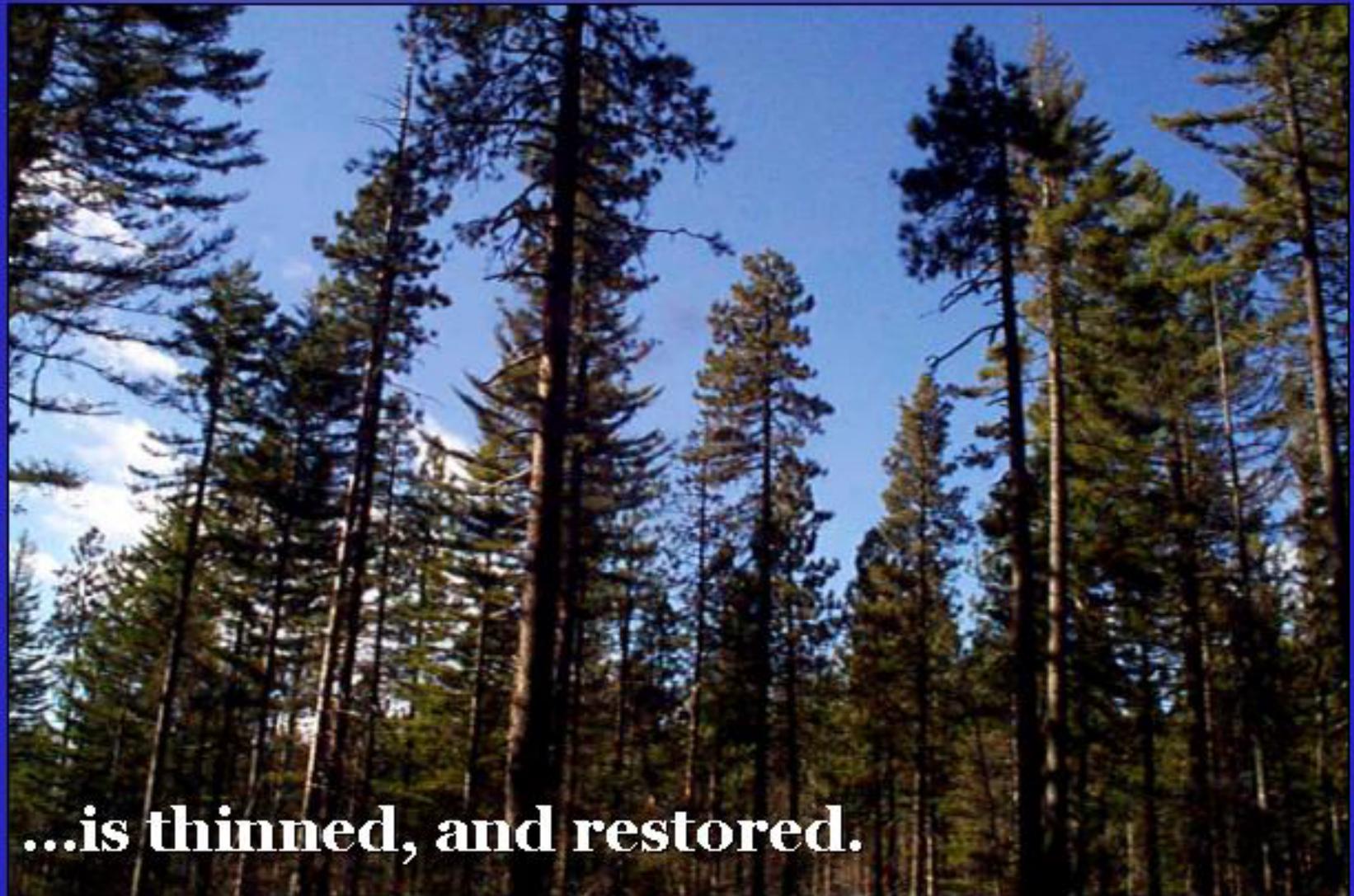
**After
Treatment**



These next two photos are another example of thinned and unthinned areas.



We remove trees that are diseased or dead. This creates space between trees, so fire cannot spread rapidly through the canopy.



...is thinned, and restored.

2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire

These photos from the 2002 Rodeo Fire in Arizona show what happens when forests are thinned. Both photos were taken after the fire. The area on the left was thinned. The area on the right was not. The larger trees in the thinned forest survived.

Both areas burned...



Thinned



Not Thinned

You'll have to look closely at this 1994 fire. This was the Tyee fire in Washington state. The green area in the middle was an area that had been thinned. On both sides of the thinning project the fire destroyed the forests. I have personally seen this phenomenon a number of times.

The Forest Service and Interior have done preventive fuels treatment on 437,000 more acres than we did this time last year.

The only area that survived this 1994 fire in Washington is the thinned area.



Oregon Fire – July 2002

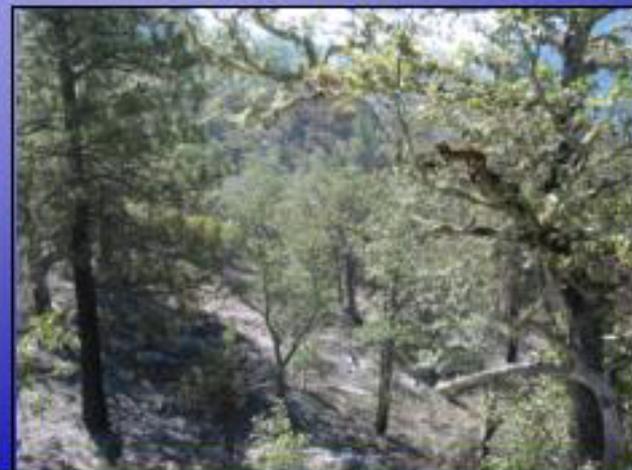
These photos were just taken from a fire in Oregon that was put out two weeks ago. On the left is the area that had not been thinned. This area experienced a high intensity burn. On the right, the area had been mechanically thinned in 1999. This area had a low intensity burn. This dramatically shows the difference between what firefighters call a good burn and a bad burn.

All of us want sustainable forests. We must work as a team to ensure vibrant forests. And we are working together.

Untreated



Treated



Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman and I created the first-ever Wildland Fire Leadership Council. This council is composed of the directors of all the Federal land management agencies. It also includes representatives from the National Governor's Association, National State Foresters, and the National Association of Counties.

County Commissioners, Governors, Interior and Agriculture Agreed To 10-Year Fire Plan

This fire council met for the first time last Thursday. It discussed work plans that have been written to implement the historic Ten Year Fire Plan that county commissioners, governors, tribes, and Secretary Veneman and I signed last May.

These work plans detail how the various agencies are going to complete each of the 23 tasks that we agreed needed to get done. We set strict deadlines and clear performance indicators.



We Agreed...

- **Public and firefighters safety are highest priority**



In that plan, we agreed that human safety --both public and firefighters -- is the highest priority. It is one of several ways in which we have recently achieved unprecedented levels of federal, state and local cooperation in fire fighting and forest management.

We Agreed...

- Forests need active management, not neglect

The signatories agreed that forests need **active** management, not neglect. We agreed that active forest management must meet long-term ecological, economic and community objectives.

We Agreed...

- **Active forest and rangeland management includes:**
 - **Long term ecological, economic, and community objectives**
 - **Thinning**
 - **Commercial products**
 - **Biomass utilization**
 - **Prescribed fire**

On a bipartisan basis -- federal, state and local -- we agreed that active management includes prescribed and mechanical thinning. We also agreed, though, that our collective taxpayer-funded revenues would never be enough to solve the whole problem.

We simply cannot afford to have the taxpayers foot the whole bill.

So we need to be creative in finding commercial markets for the smaller trees removed when forests are thinned. One possibility is biomass energy, which provides heat or electricity or even liquid fuel from forest products.

We Agreed...

There was not complete unanimity about traditional commercial timber harvests. To some, the phrase “timber harvest” inevitably conjures up the image of clear cuts in old growth forests.

Clear cuts are being used less and less. In 1991, the Forest Service estimated that 23 percent of its timber was harvested through clear cuts. Today, that percentage is less than 10 percent.

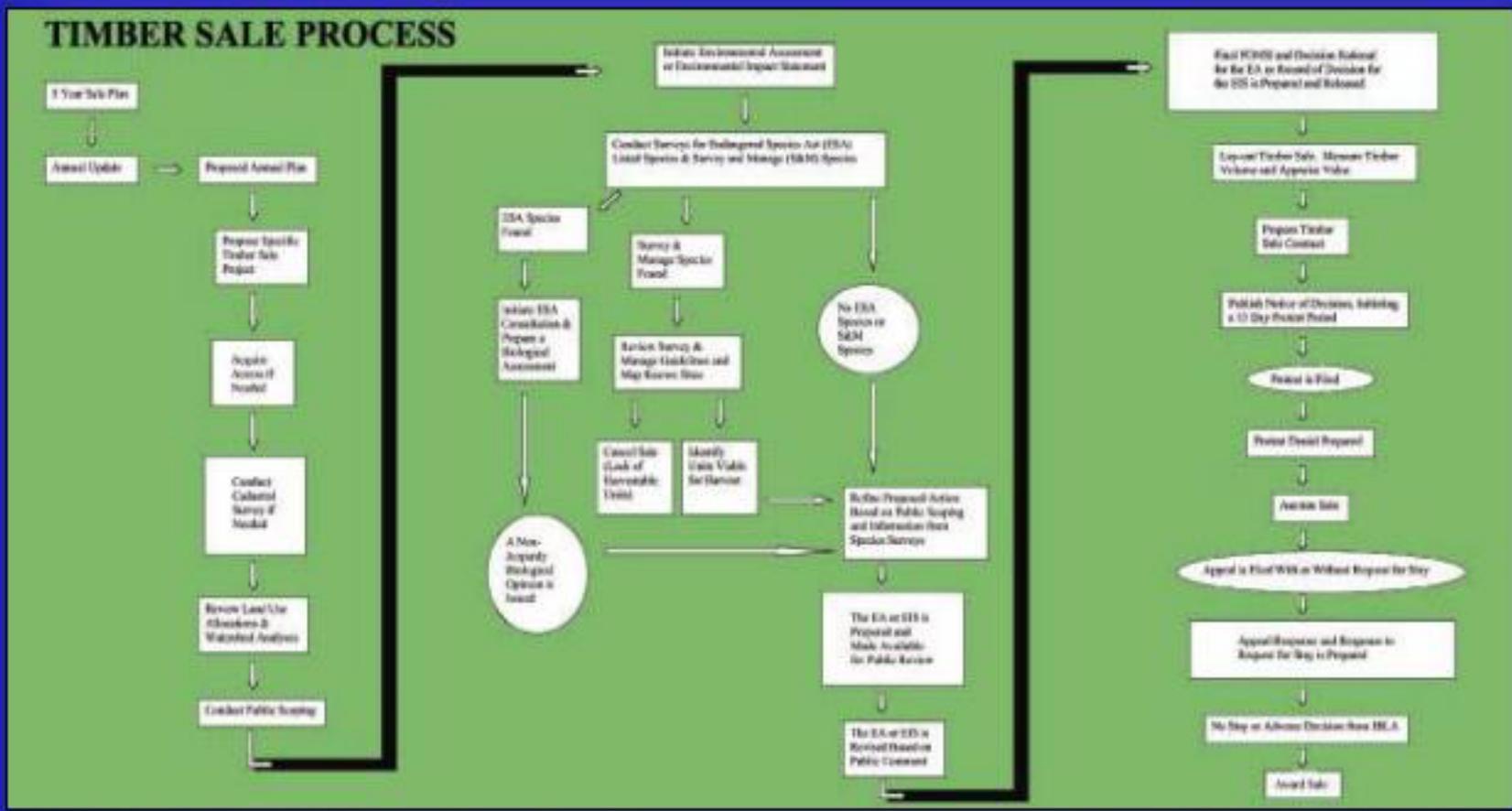
Clear cuts are only used when it is necessary for forest management, like when areas have been affected by beetles or spruce budworm.

At BLM, most of our commercial timber comes from Western Oregon. That timber is governed by the Northwest Forest Plan. That plan requires that a certain number of large trees remain to help regenerate the forests.

We plan to propose legislation that would allow expanded use of stewardship contracts. Under these arrangements, a private company, county or non-profit group assumes the responsibility for doing mechanical thinning in exchange for keeping the wood removed from the forest.

The goal would be restoring the forest to a healthy condition, so the contract would not be as profitable for those doing the work or the federal treasury as a traditional timber sale

Here Is a Diagram of the Timber Sale Process



We also agreed we need to find ways to streamline the bureaucratic processes that are often obstacles to making our forests and rangelands healthier.

Here is a diagram of the process involved in a typical timber sale on BLM land. This is not an exaggeration. It was prepared by BLM career staff.

Analysis – Part I



This process produces a huge amount of analysis. These next two slides show the amount of analysis required for a timber sale. This photo shows the resource management plan for an area in Oregon.

Analysis – Part II



This stack of paper is the administrative record for a particular timber sale. It was not a sale where we were proposing going into a pristine old-growth area – it was primarily to remove already-dead trees from a burned area. Under the current approach, we would need similar analysis for many large-scale forest thinning projects.

Environmental analysis is a very good idea, but some common-sense streamlining is necessary. We are reviewing our regulations and policies.

As we develop our proposals, we will be talking with environmentalists and industry and state, local and county officials about the best ideas to improve our lands.

For example, we will look to establish a process for concurrent environmental clearance by federal agencies.

We are looking to combine project analyses to reduce the number of overlapping environmental reviews.

We will change the way we compare short term-risk against long-term benefits. There is no question that a prescribed burn or a mechanically thinned area has negative short-term environmental effects. But if, over the longer term, that work makes the area safer from catastrophic fire, then the long term benefits may be more important.

We are looking at the best practices for streamlining environmental regulation. For example, in Montana, Idaho, Utah, Oregon and Washington, the Forest Service, BLM, FWS and NMFS have agreed to an expedited consultation process on fuels treatment work that occurs in areas where endangered species may be present. If that process works, we'll work to apply it nationally.

We need everyone to help get the word out to all homeowners whose properties are at risk of fire about what they can do to make their homes safer from wildland fire.

Together we can start a new century of forest restoration.

