# Forest Service

I once took an S-130, S-190 firefighting refresher course from the former head of Forest Service firefighting. A lot of firefighters died on his watch and it wasn't hard to see why. Almost all wildland firefighter deaths occur when the wind changes, so he repeatedly stressed the importance of the weather report as a safety factor. Having recently been on scene at a potentially deadly wildfire blowup from a local and not uncommon weather phenomenon that no weather report could have forecast, I described the event. He spent a few minutes trying to explain it with his superficial knowledge of meteorology and when it didn't fit he said 'lets move on' with a hint of anger in his voice. A lot of firefighters die trusting the weather and he just didn't get it. When there's fuel between you and the fire, you're at the mercy of the wind. The weather report is a vital tool in planning firefighting strategy, but betting lives on a weather report is nuts.

It's Forest Service policy that everything that's thrown away must be sufficiently destroyed so that it can never be reused. I've seen and heard dozens of firsthand accounts of wanton waste after fires. Pallets of new chainsaw parts. Pallets of hand tools. Thousands of feet of hose. Hundreds of meal packs… Dumped in a hole and buried. I heard one firsthand account of armed guards at the landfill to prevent scavenging. It's an aberration of the 'use it or lose it' policy. Get everything off the inventory or next years budget will shrink.

A Forest Service employee told me about driving the gas hog truck all day for a week just to get money off the fuel allotment gas card before the end of the fiscal year.

A friend with a surplus store bought a load of stuff at a Forest Service auction. Much of it was piles of hand tools, every one sawed in half. It looked like most of the handles just needed a sanding or a wedge and some looked just fine. Piles of Forest Service hand tools show up in the scrap yard, always with the handles cut off flush with the metal so that it's a pain in the ass to put in a new handle. Sometimes they still have the labels on them. They're new.

I was talking with a friend one day and she said 'Bob, I can't work at the fire cache this year. I just can't stomach the waste. Last year they took 15 chainsaws, lined them up in a row and ran the dozer over them'.

The Forest Service uses private contractors to move equipment around and Jim was hired to drive his semi to the northwest. The stuff he moved could have been bought new for less than his fuel costs alone.

The Forest Service had a program called Fire Prevention Patrol that hired engines and crews from local volunteer departments to patrol, looking for fires. For the first few years, if they found a fire, no matter what size or potential, if they made any attempt whatsoever to put it out, their employment would be immediately terminated. All they could do was call in a Forest Service crew if they were lucky enough to be in a place where the radio worked. It was pure pork rationalized as public relations that took volunteer department equipment and personnel out of service on their districts. They weren't a bit more useful than anyone else in the woods, but they cost taxpayers a bundle. They eventually realized how foolish it looked, the policy changed, and everyone involved needed red cards.

We were working a fire in a cottonwood grove in Arenas Valley. It was part of a larger grass fire at a loose urban interface. It hadn't burned in many years, so the duff and dead branches were as much as four feet deep. It was way overdue to burn. There was enough already burned open field and a road on three sides to contain it, and a bare dirt field to the north, so we were just herding it along. We didn't have enough water to put it out, but we had just enough water to keep the heat down enough to not kill the trees. Suddenly, a Forest Service crew showed up, never checked in with incident command, and commenced to dig a line and start a backfire. Where the two fires converged, the heat killed quite a few trees. Behind their line was only about another twenty yards of thicket to burn out before the bare dirt field. By cutting a line in the middle of deep, dry, fine fuel, the Forest Service crew put themselves in mortal danger if there was a sudden change in the wind, a common event that time of year. When I tried to talk to them about what they'd done, they scoffed. They were the professionals, we were just volunteers. They left, thinking that they'd shown those dumb volunteers how it's done, when the reality was that they'd completely screwed up.

The Forest Service called one day and asked if I wanted to buy some sawlogs pushed for a road rebuild and it’s associated gravel pit and could I move the half next to the pit tomorrow so they could enlarge it. They’d been pushed for six months. I bought the portion by the pit, skidded them out of the way, with no small inconvenience due to their hurry and the fact that they’d been pushed into a jackstrawed mess, and started hauling. They called one day and asked me to drive out and negotiate an immediate sale alongside the road where they were about to block access. I declined because there wasn’t a single saw log at that spot and even if their had been, a half a day and forty miles of  driving for each of us wasn’t worth ten bucks worth of logs. Much of the Forest Service has no concept whatsoever of fiscal responsibility.

In 2005 I was crew boss in supply on the Bear Fire. It’s akin to quartermaster’s assistant, and it brings you in contact with all aspects of personnel; the head honcho, the division bosses, the communications crew, the firefighters on the line, the sawyers, the scouts who parachute in ahead of the fire and scout terrain, the engine crews, the truck drivers, law enforcement, the camp crews, the bookkeepers, the caterers, the laundromat, the recyclers, the trash collectors, the people selling souvenir t-shirts. By about the forth day we were up to around 700 people. In the nine days that I was there, we handed out about thirty-five cubic feet of double-A batteries. On the eighth day the rains came and put the fire down. Our efforts, as is common with recent large stand replacement fires, ended up having a minimal effect on the course of the fire. We had no air support because of the Warm Fire. The Warm Fire burned a very dense, overgrown, underburned, creatureless mixed conifer forest on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. It was so ready to burn that it consumed 25,000 acres in one night. The rebirth was long overdue. Air support was mostly a waste of time and resources and was politically motivated because it was a national park. That air support would have been useful on the Bear Fire. The Bear Fire burned until it ran out of fuel and the rains put it out. The immediate cause of the fire was probably a camp fire, but the real causes for its destructive intensity were long term fire suppression and incompetent logging and thinning thirty to fifty years previous in combination with a winter without snow. Where Turkey Creek meets Gilita Creek it runs in a deep east west V canyon. The sides of the canyon were to steep to log so it was an island of original forest. On the north side it was big yellow ponderosas in sand and cactus; on the south side it was virgin spruce, hung thick with moss. It was so cold in December that we couldn't get the wine out of the bottle. In the summer there was a pretty little meadow at the fork, and Gilita Creek was full of Brown Trout. It was right in the middle of the fire when the plume was several miles wide.

The year after the Skates Fire in the Gila, I wanted to do some salvage logging on a spot where an intentional backfire had moonscaped a ridge. They had back-burned from a road, in the afternoon, with the wind and sun at their backs, uphill, into a dense ground to canopy fuel load of oak, juniper, and ponderosa that had been kept from burning for way too long. From twenty miles away, it looked like a not so small nuke went off. The fire was so hot that the rock was shattered four inches deep in places. Four hundred year old junipers were burnt off to just the trunks and the stubs of major branches and boiled to the core. Some of the ponderosas were burnt up completely. It took a week to get hold of the ranger, and another week and a half for him to meet me on sight. I showed them around and they said ok, take anything you want. It was obvious that they knew next to nothing about forest ecology. They commented on how well the non-native grass that had been helicopter seeded had controlled erosion, not noticing that in the places they'd missed, the native vegetation had done just as good a job and that their replacement had sprouted quickly and grown tall, shading out the native ground cover and wildflowers, and by the next fire season was tall, dry and crisp and a fire hazard. It took them another week and a half to figure out how to write a permit and when they did, it wasn't even vaguely accurate as to what I was taking. By the time they got around to giving me the permit, much of the ponderosa had already started to rot. They charged me twenty bucks for five loads. The time they wasted was worth many hundreds. From start to finish they did more harm than good.

Like a lot of forest that has been logged, then thinned, the north side of Signal Peak was ripe to burn, and it did. Quite a few people saw it coming, but nothing meaningful was done to deal with the potential for a large fire. After logging and subsequent thinning, the north side of Signal Peak was a continuous, uniform, deep canopy of second growth mixed conifer. This is a very unnatural condition, and is a typical result of Forest Service logging and thinning policy. Once the fire gets in the canopy with a bit of wind, there's no stopping it. What was needed was a variegated canopy with some contoured clear-cut for fire control. Too late now.

In September I went to the Forest Service to see about getting a few saw logs off the burn. They were starting to clear-cut the roadway up the north side of Signal Peak. There were some big Douglas Firs that needed to come down that looked like they'd make good quality tongue and groove flooring, and there were a lot of fairly large Ponderosas. Because it had been selective logged and thinned, most of it was full of knots, but that's what you get these days.

Several weeks and three trips to the woods later, [take a look, meet with the Forest Circus Kid in charge, take a look at what he's marked, take a look at what he's unmarked because they were a few feet too far from the road], he tells me the permit will be ready on Monday morning. Monday morning we spend 40 minutes at the Forest Service office trying to keep a straight face while they try to figure out how to write the permit. They finally gave up and called it a viga sale. Thirty two dollars and fifteen cents. The Forest Service had already wasted around five hundred bucks of our time and gas money and the taxpayer's time and gas money. Other than some simple guide lines [only cut trees that can fall on the road, don't cut anything that still has any needles, clean up when you're done], there was no need whatsoever for their involvement.

The kid didn't have a clue what a saw log was. He'd mark a snagly pile of knots far from the road and leave a good saw log right next to the road. Since they were all coming down anyway, there was no reason whatsoever to mark them in the first place.

There were many hundreds of prime quality vigas along the road and he had a hotshot crew cutting them into six foot lengths for firewood. Except for decorative fires and the few people

who have a woodstove designed for continuous full air flow, nobody with any sense burns ponderosa for firewood. It creosotes the chimney worst of any local wood. Enticing people to burn ponderosa is likely to get someone's house burnt down. Fir isn't much better. It burns cleaner, but the bark hardly burns at all and often needs to be removed. Since it's on a burn scar, all of it is covered in filthy black soot. There's always been a market for high quality vigas. Sustainably harvestable vigas are rather rare.

Jim wanted 70 vigas and the Forest Service sent him twice as far to the Burro Mountains to get much lower quality live vigas. When he heard that I was salvaging logs on the Signal Fire, he set up a viga sale with the Forest Service. What the kid marked for him was almost twice as big as what Jim had specified, thereby seriously compromising his house plans and substantially increasing the cost. Meanwhile the Hotshot crew cut up the size he wanted. Since they were all coming down anyway, there was no reason whatsoever to mark the vigas in the first place.

The Forest Service seeded the burn scar with barley. Since it didn't grow until after the rains came, it had very little effect on erosion, but it shaded out and stunted a lot of the natives. For the next few years the burn scar should have been full of wildflowers, but the barley shaded them out. Since there was almost nothing to protect in the watershed below the fire, there was no reason to stop most of the erosion in the first place. The money could have been spent on much more realistic and efficient erosion control with ground crews on the burn and further downstream That mountain used to be a thousand feet higher. The forest will come back in its own sweet time. There's a lot we can do to help the process along, but seeding a foreign and unnatural grass isn't one of them. What's left after the Hotshot crew dropped all the trees is a jackstrawed mess, and the only fire hazard is because of the barley. It could have been done much differently.

The Forest Circus Kid wanted me to remove the tops of all the trees I took in some misguided generalization about reducing fuel load. It would take many hundreds of dollars worth of time, fuel, and pollution to haul them to the landfill where they'll be a nuisance and a fire hazard. Skidding them out would just tear up the woods more. Some of them needed to be rearranged, but most of them needed to lay right where they were to mulch and replenish the soil. There was no talking to him. He's the boss, these are the rules, so shut up and do what you're told.

Regardless of his intentions and rationalizations, the reality from my end of it is that the Brown Nosed Forest Circus Kid is an ignorant screw-up running a sleazy little protection racket on the taxpayer's dime who disgusts and demoralizes his crews. If this were any other business in the world he'd have been fired a long time ago, but this is the Forest Service. You can't get fired and the browner your nose, the quicker your paycheck grows.

It took four months to arrange a meeting on site with the district ranger. It turned out that she had never been out there. When I told her I wasn't interested in going out there just to get lectured by fools, she said "trust me". Lectured by fools is exactly what I got. She took the timber management guy and the kid with her. They spent hours lecturing me on the many reasons why a few bare, dead tops in the middle of half a million other dead tops were a fire hazard. All of it was the most pathetic nonsense. They were obsessed with the rules for a conventional logging contract which had very little to do with a burn scar, and they never once looked at what we were actually dealing with. Who needs to think when you can find some rules to follow? Talking about their reasons with the many intelligent people I know with real knowledge of fire and forestry, I find complete consensus that the three of them made ludicrous

fools of themselves. We'd all be laughing if it wasn't so disgusting. From start to finish, the Forest Service did more harm than good.

After almost a century of foolish fire suppression, the Forest Service decided, just as foolishly, to let it all burn. They let the Whitewater-Baldy Complex fire burn at the end of a long, La Nina induced drought. If they'd held it back for just a few years, we could have burned it in a wet summer and it would have been a good fire instead of total devastation.

A few years ago the Rim Fire in the Sierra Nevada cost the government over a hundred million dollars, but it cost the local population and the environment a lot more. These large fires are having a very significant effect on the melt rate of the Greenland Ice Cap. Forty million dollars worth of large air tankers flying in formation in combination with some strategic strip clearcuts could have shut it down for a fraction of the environmental and monetary costs. A few million bucks worth of converted A-10 Warthogs would have had a fair chance at shutting it down the first day. When I corresponded with the former head of Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management, I got a very lazy, arrogant and obsolete view of what aerial firefighting should be. He seemed clueless about fire, forestry, and aviation.

I could go on and on with many more stories of Forest Service incompetence and so could a thousand other people. They’re not called the Forest Circus for nothing. For the health of the forests, the firefighters, the communities at the wildland interface, the logging industry, the local and global environment, and the state and federal budgets, get a second opinion and put our efforts to better use.

There are a lot of districts within the Forest Service, and a lot of variation in the expertise of their staffs. I can only speak from direct experience about a few of them, but I hear a lot of anecdotal accounts from people who have interacted with the Forest Service. Having talked to hundreds of people about Forest Service policy and practice, the overwhelming opinion has been disgust with the arrogance and incompetence of their leadership and mid level bureaucracy.

There are many fine intelligent people in the Forest Service who know what needs to be done, but they seldom get the chance due to the massive inbred inertia of bureaucracy, ignorance, apathy, corruption, and incompetent leadership. They're much more likely to quit in disgust than they are to move up to a decision making position.

There's not all that much forest in the Southwest left to burn, but there's a lot of forest being reborn after the fires. Let's not let the same bureaucracy that burned it down be in charge of stewarding its rebirth.

There's a tipping point where, in any working environment, incompetent management can drive away any real talent and competency by causing them to quit in disgust. Large portions of the U.S. Government have tipped into pervasive incompetence.

In a business environment, incompetent management generally results in failure and a more competent company fill the void. In government, there's no bottom line, no competition, and you can't get fired. This is a problem that's pervasive and destructive throughout government agencies. Without the ability to fire incompetent personnel, bureaucracies can reach a tipping point where the core management becomes incompetent and corrupt to the point where it drives away competency and becomes self sustaining. This is at the core of most of the current disgust with government that's prevalent in the world today. The pervasive waste, incompetence, and corruption of our current government is not so much the politicians, but the large percentage of

unelected mid-level staffing throughout the many administrations that are a bunch of incompetent screw-ups who can't get fired. This needs to change.