

## 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.

After we've helped the rains put the fires out, over at the fire cache you might see someone line up 15 chainsaws in a row and run the dozer over them. You might see someone cutting up ATVs with a cutting torch. You might see someone cutting the handles off piles of hand tools. They cut the handles off flush with the metal so it's a pain in the ass to get the old handle out. They bring good money on EBay. They're very high quality and they're not available for sale to the public. You might see a pile of high quality metal fuel jugs; every one bashed in with an ax. Someone will be cutting up piles and piles of sleeping bags, most of which could be easily cleaned and given to homeless folks. 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. This is typical of the day to day operation of the U.S. Forest Service. The official Forest Service policy that everything that is disposed of must be so thoroughly destroyed that it can never be used again, in combination with the desire for new equipment every year, has been in place for at least 45 years that I know of. Almost all of it is good used equipment, bought and paid for by the American taxpayer. Every other government agency auctions or donates their used equipment. If you look into it, you'll be appalled at the level of waste.

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.

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, we had enough equipment on scene to handle the rest of the fire, so we were just herding it along. We didn't have enough water to put it out, but we had 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 saw-logs 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 jack-strawed 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.

Just recently, it took Tim one entire day on the phone to slog through the bureaucratic bullshit just to get his crew motel rooms for the week.

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. Our efforts, as is common with recent large stand replacement fires, ended up having a minimal effect on the course of the fire. The wind took it wherever it wanted for a few days through the high elevation mixed conifers, then the open pine forest on the plains east of the mountain slowed it down. On the eighth day the rains came and put the fire down. We had no air support because of the Warm Fire. The Warm Fire burned a very dense, overgrown, under burned, creature-less mixed conifer plateau 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 too

steep to log so it was an island of virgin 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 small scale 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 a few dozen trees. 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 clearings for fire control where we start new forest. 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 selectively 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 in 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 it spits a lot of sparks, and since it's on a burn scar, all of it is covered in thick, 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 not much to protect in the watershed below the fire, there was no reason to stop most of the erosion in the first place. It brings fresh soil to the valleys below. 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 Forest Service crew dropped all the trees along the roads was 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. The idea that a few dozen bare poles laying on the ground in the middle of half a million dead bare poles was ludicrous. 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 was that the Brown Nosed Forest Circus Kid was 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 found 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.

A friend contracts a water tender to the Forest Service. When he blew an engine, he still had two years on his contract, so he bought another truck. It carried a little more water, which put it just over the edge into the next size classification. Rather than except a little free water for two years, they made him cut a chunk out of the tank so the gallonage matched the paperwork.

As fires become larger and hotter due mostly to excess fire suppression, climate change, and Forest Service incompetence, it's costing the government and the local communities a lot more money. These large fires are having a very significant effect on the melt rate of the Greenland Ice Cap. Forty million dollars worth of very large air tankers flying in formation in combination with some strategic strip clearcuts could better deal with them for a fraction of the environmental and monetary costs of our current efforts. A few million bucks worth of converted A-10 Warthogs would have a fair chance at shutting many of them down the first day or steering them around. When I corresponded with the former head of Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management, I got a very ignorant, lazy, arrogant and obsolete view of what aerial firefighting should be.

50 years ago, when they quit using agent orange in Viet Nam, the agent orange manufacturers found a new market. In the US Northwest, environmentalists were pressuring the Forest Service to plant trees on the clearcuts, but they were too covered in dense brush to plant trees, so they used agent orange to clear the brush. They were completely unaware that the brush was necessary to stabilize the soil before it's ready for new forest. Forest Service focus is on a very shortsighted view of how to grow a forest. Their focus is on growing trees, not forests. They literally can't see the forest for the trees.

There's not all that much forest 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. The focus needs to change from growing trees to growing forests, and it takes time. A tree farm is not a forest. It sequesters much less carbon, it's seriously lacking in biodiversity, and it makes crappy lumber.

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 more likely to quit in disgust than they are to move up to a decision making position.

There's a tipping point where, in any working environment, incompetent management can drive away any real talent and competency by keeping them down for fear of rocking the boat, or 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 lazy, ignorant, incompetent screw-ups who can't get fired. This needs to change. I see little chance of this changing from within anytime soon without massive intervention from the top down. As time retires the old guard, things are gradually getting better, but not nearly fast enough, and in some districts it's getting worse. A substantial haircut of selective early retirement would surely help, but who's to do the picking and choosing? The Forest Service is desperately in need of new blood to replace its incompetent fat belly.