A National Proposal for a National Forest Watershed Restoration Corps

Green Jobs in our National Forests to Stimulate the Economy
December 10, 2008

Introduction: Congress once again is considering an economic stimulus package. As part of this package, Congress has the opportunity to put people back to work while accomplishing comprehensive restoration of our national forest watersheds. Public investment in restoration can sustain American families whose lives and work are tightly connected to our national forests; restore needed natural infrastructure and reclaim unneeded roads; make forests more resilient and adaptable to the unknown consequences of climate change; and assist the Forest Service and other federal natural resource stewards to meet basic environmental responsibilities, which has been increasingly difficult due to severe budget cuts over the last eight years. In sum, investing in forest watershed restoration will have tangible, long-term human and ecological benefits.

The proposal: Create a Forest Watershed Restoration Corps within the Forest Service funded at $500 million over the next two years to decommission forest roads, repair fish culverts and maintain forest roads used for recreation and administration. A Forest Watershed Restoration Corp can provide jobs in communities adjacent to national forests through contracts to local community members to complete restoration work and also create staffing opportunities within the Forest Service, such as term appointments that may be made permanent if the Forest Service's budget is restored in subsequent years.

The **Forest Watershed Restoration Corps** could be analogous to a small-scale Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the most popular program of the New Deal, also referred to as Roosevelt's "Tree Army." The economic situation today isn't as dire as it was in the thirties when the CCC employed a half million young men. Nevertheless, the creation of jobs in rural areas is urgently needed. Providing funds for rural businesses and workforce development over several years creates economic stability in an important but often overlooked part of America during an economic downturn that may to last for a decade or more.[1] A short-term, quick payout stimulus package does not necessarily provide the type of support that will bolster rural families and communities adjacent to our national forests during these difficult times.

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[1] Phillips, Kevin. 2008. *Bad Money: Reckless Finance, Failed Politics and the Global Crisis of American Capitalism*.

Threats to our National Forest Watersheds: Healthy forests are essential to rural communities, biotic communities and our planet. Large intact and functioning forest ecosystems provide clean drinking water for more than 60 million Americans; habitat for fish and wildlife; recreational opportunities for the public; and a place of solace and inspiration to those who visit. Healthy, restored forest watersheds are better able to adapt and respond to climate change, ensuring clean water for the long term. Further, forests are critical for sequestering carbon and they aid in the moderation of temperature.

One of the most significant threats to forest watersheds and their biotic communities is failing forest roads. Deteriorating, unmaintained and poorly designed national forest roads harm fish through the chronic contribution of sediments into forest streams. Many of these fish are threatened and endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The same sediment fouls drinking water and increases the need for communities to build expensive water filtration systems. Unmaintained roads, especially in mountainous regions, are more likely to fail in severe storm events, contributing massive amounts of sediment to streams. In 2006 and 2007 alone severe storms in the Pacific Northwest led to massive road failures and road-triggered landslides, resulting in tens of millions of dollars of damage to public and private lands. Storms such as this are becoming more common because of climate change, even further bolstering the need for an investment in restoration now.

When undermaintained roads fail, outdoor enthusiasts and even citizens with private in-holdings lose access to the forest until those roads are repaired. It costs far more to fix the roads after they fail, and to clean up the damage (much of which is irreparable), than to address problems prior to road failures. Roads spread invasive pests, plants and pathogens, fragment important wildlife habitat and dramatically change hydrologic and aquatic conditions.

Currently, at best, only 36%[2] of the twelve western states' national forest roads are maintained to "standard." These twelve states contain more than 85% of the entire National Forest road system. The Forest Service never planned for or assessed the impact of this extremely limited maintenance capacity on forest and water resources, and the impact becomes exponentially more significant each year. In 2001, the Forest Service estimated that it could remove nearly half of its entire road system[3] (up to 186,000 miles out of the total 380,000 mile system), while still meeting the resource and recreational needs of forest users. Many of these roads were built for obsolete logging systems and now are heavily overgrown and prone to landslides from heavy

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[2] United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2006. U.S. Forest Service Annual Road Assessment Reports

[3] National Forest System Road Management Rule and Policy. May 2001.

rains or snowmelt. This year the Forest Service determined that approximately 25,000 miles of existing Forest Service roads suitable for passenger vehicles are necessary to access developed recreation sites, key trailheads, visitor centers, and state or private land developments. There is ample opportunity to put people to work restoring watersheds and remediating road problems.

Removing unneeded, ecologically damaging roads is the first and most critical step towards watershed restoration. Repairing culverts to restore fish passage, in combination with performing critical maintenance, is imperative for those roads that we need to keep. We have an obligation to restore watersheds to provide the resiliency and adaptability necessary to respond to the impacts of climate change and the associated increase in storms and flooding.

The Economic Context: The Forest Service estimates their road maintenance backlog at nearly $8 billion[4] -- although when administrative and indirect costs are included the backlog actually totals closer to $10.3 billion[5]. Shrinking budgets have ensured that each year the Forest Service slips further behind in its responsibility to maintain its road system.

Over the last twenty years timber sales -- which used to provide much of the revenue for road maintenance -- have declined. But even when timber receipts were at their highest, the Forest Service was not able to fully maintain its road system. Road obliteration can be extremely costly, with medium-sized and major roads ranging from $40,000 - $70,000 and $100,000 - $250,000 per mile respectively.[6] Costs are even higher in the Pacific Northwest due to high rainfall and the steep grade of the land. That said, many forest roads are small-sized and numerous forests have been able to reclaim roads for approximately $10,000 per mile.

National forests were and are an important source of jobs in rural, resource-dependent communities but declining timber harvests cause challenges for rural economies. A recent report from the Western Wood Products Association predicts the decline in timber jobs will continue in the upcoming years as housing starts stall. The Association points out that over the last three years demand for lumber has declined by 20 billion board feet – the amount that all the western mills produced in 2005 alone. The current financial crisis will hit these communities very hard.

Investing in a comprehensive watershed restoration program can provide people in rural, resource dependent communities with the same high-wage, high-skill jobs derived in the past from building roads or extracting timber. Since these jobs require the very same heavy

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[4] United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2004. *Fiscal Year 2005 Forest Service Budget Justification*. sec. 10, p.33.

[5] Taxpayers for Common Sense. March, 2004. *Road Wrecked: Why the $10 billion Forest Service Road Maintenance Backlog is Bad for Taxpayers*.

[6] United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2000. *Forest Service Roadless Area Conservation: Final Environmental Impact Statement*.

equipment needed to build roads, and since that machinery is expensive to transport, the jobs are most likely to go to local workers. Local workers will spend the bulk of their paychecks directly in their own communities. Furthermore, this work will encourage local contractors and workers to make long-term investments in equipment and training.

An infusion of $250 million a year can create 3500 direct jobs in the rural West, in addition to any other jobs that are sustained or created through multiplier effects. We believe such a program could be viable for decades to come as it will take decades, at minimum, to address the backlog of maintenance needs and road decommissioning projects to restore functioning, dynamic, resilient watershed conditions on our national forests.

With the decline in the forest products industry, many of the skilled workers required to restore the forest have been or soon will be lost to emigration or attrition. In order to maintain an essential skilled workforce we suggest that all contracts require some portion of the workers to be enrolled in a state recognized apprenticeship program.

Program Implementation: The Forest Watershed Restoration Corps program would need to immediately hire staff to begin planning and implementing projects. While there are numerous remediation and reclamation projects that have already undergone environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other applicable resource protection statutes, there is also a significant need to increase planning capacity to ensure a steady supply of NEPA-ready projects over the long-term. Lack of fully planned and reviewed projects is currently one of the main impediments to building a strong restoration program in the agency, while the second primary impediment is a lack of restoration funding. This proposal could directly address both of those challenges.

As part of the immediate job creation opportunity of this economic stimulus, we believe the Forest Service will need to staff up to implement a Forest Watershed Restoration Corps and that each of the approximately 150 national forests, proportional to their need, will need to hire at least one of each of the following:

- a trained contracting specialist
- an individual capable of overseeing NEPA project planning
- a geoengineering, hydrologist, geomorphologist or soils engineer for contract implementation oversight
- either a fish or wildlife biologist

Furthermore, we recommend that since these projects are entirely restorative in nature that the NEPA process can be facilitated for most projects by the appropriate use of categorical exclusions for project implementation.

The 600 Forest Service positions referenced above could be filled as temporary, professional appointments that could be converted to permanent if funds become available. Forest Service jobs would consume less than a fifth of the $250 million requested annually from an economic stimulus package and still provide an extensive infusion of funding for local contractors and rural workers.

While all forests can immediately take advantage of planning funds to hire new staff, implementation funds could be prioritized based on climate and elevation depending on when a stimulus package is adopted. Forests in the south, for example, will be able to engage in remediation and restoration projects in the winter, while more northern or high elevation forests will be required to wait until spring to begin implementation.

The program will provide real jobs to former road builders, primarily excavator and bulldozer operators and qualified on-the-ground inspectors. These types of workers have not only been displaced by the timber industry, but they are also feeling the pinch from the decline in housing starts, as many excavator operators also work in that arena. But even experienced heavy equipment operators will need some retraining in both the science and art of road reclamation, so there will also be opportunities to develop watershed restoration training and certification programs that can ensure that this work is done effectively and efficiently on the ground – guaranteeing that the results are beneficial for watersheds. Companion funding could also be provided to develop a systematic, comparative area monitoring program through the agency's research branch or through universities to ensure that new technologies are being tested and monitored for effectiveness. A timely infusion of funding through the stimulus program could help kick start new careers in watershed restoration while simultaneously bolstering the growing restoration economy.

Building on the Legacy Roads and Trails Remediation Initiative: The Interior portion of the Fiscal Year 2008 Consolidated Appropriations bill provided $40 million "for urgently needed road decommissioning, road and trail repair and maintenance and associated activities, and removal of fish passage barriers, especially in areas where Forest Service roads may be contributing to water quality problems in streams and water bodies which support threatened, endangered or sensitive species or community water sources and for urgently needed road repairs required due to recent storm events."

Legacy Roads funding was distributed nationally and as a result a new watershed restoration program began last year within the Forest Service. At that rate of funding it will take 100 years for the Legacy Roads program to work through the $10 billion road maintenance backlog. We need a new approach to restore our watershed and assist people in rural, resource dependent communities and the economic stimulus package could provide the impetus to solve these problems.

Conclusion: The Forest Watershed Restoration Corps provides both an economic and ecological solution to pressing problems in our forests and near-forest communities. As with the CCC, the Forest Watershed Restoration Corps has the potential to provide employment in nearly every state of the nation and as importantly, to enable people to feel good about the work they are doing and the positive difference they are making to forests and streams. The need to restore our national forests is critical at this time of global uncertainty, and people will be proud of the contribution they make to protect our drinking water, fish and wildlife, recreational opportunities and climate.

The undersigned strongly urge you to provide $500 million over two years to create a Forest Watershed Restoration Corps to provide jobs in rural communities and improve the health of our forest watersheds. We request that this proposal is included in the final economic stimulus package developed in 2009. We appreciate your consideration of this proposal.

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