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## ***AS WE SEE IT*** September 2025

### ***We've Been Here Before***

Let me explain. During 2002 and 2003 America suffered through over 11 million acres of wildfire resulting in the deaths of 22 firefighters and 25 civilians, with over 10,000 homes destroyed. Arizona, Colorado, and Oregon each recorded their largest wildfires in 100 years. California's Cedar Fire in San Diego County burned over 273,000 acres and claimed 15 lives, making it the largest and deadliest wildfire in California up until that time.

Americans, particularly those west of the Mississippi, were appalled by this and demanded something better for their forests and their communities. Congress listened, and on May 1, 2003, introduced the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA). The legislation quickly worked its way through Congress with strong bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate, and on December 3, 2003, President George W. Bush signed HFRA into law.

The HFRA was designed to promote increased forest thinning followed by prescribed burning, with the goal of protecting forest ecosystems and communities. Success was achieved by streamlining the environmental review process while funding the USFS and BLM at levels that enabled clearing over 6 million acres of hazardous fuels during HFRA's first 3 years.

The HFRA's renewed emphasis on forest management through streamlined environmental review and increased forest thinning did not sit well with mainstream environmental organizations. The Sierra Club and National Resource Defense Council, joined by over 150 other groups, launched a relentless campaign deriding the HFRA as a "trojan horse for logging" that would "gut environmental protections." An avalanche of litigation followed that stymied progress. Meanwhile, from 2004 to 2008, another 190 lives were lost, with 41 million acres and 25,000 structures burned.

The election of the Obama/Biden Administration ushered in the reframing of forest management, pivoting away from the HFRA. Obama/Biden did not repeal the HFRA, but instead "shelved" its reforms, shifting to rigorous environmental review with an emphasis on "ecosystem restoration" and "climate adaptive strategies." The terms timber harvesting and hazardous fuels reduction gave way to ecological sustainability and biodiversity conservation.



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During the 8 years of Obama/Biden, wildfires scorched almost 56 million acres of America's forests and rangeland. Approximately 300 firefighters and civilians perished. An estimated 35,000 structures, including homes, businesses, and other buildings were destroyed. In 2009 and 2010 alone, 30 large sawmills in the western United States were shuttered.

In 2011, the United States surpassed China and became the leading IMPORTER of softwood lumber in the world.

The Trump/Pence team took office in 2017 with plans to completely overhaul the Obama/Biden forest management policies. To underscore their resolve, President Trump signed Executive Order 13855 titled "Promoting Active Management of America's Forests, Rangelands, and Other Federal Lands to Improve Conditions and Reduce Wildfire Risk."

The timber industry described this pivot back to Bush-era initiatives as "a long-awaited shift toward revitalizing domestic timber production and reforming federal forest management." Lead environmental groups called EO13855 a "gift to the timber industry" and a "dangerous rollback" of conservation policy. All legal avenues to challenge timber projects were explored, with hundreds of lawsuits filed, some still pending 7 years later.

During the Trump/Pence Administration, wildfires consumed approximately 34 million acres, and an estimated 40,000 structures were lost. Over 350 firefighters and civilians died during that period. Over 50 major forest products facilities were closed or curtailed. Thousands of logging, trucking, and sawmill worker jobs were lost.

America remained the leading importer of lumber in the world.

In an effort to block a second Trump presidency, the League of Conservation Voters pledged \$100 million to defeat the Trump/Pence ticket and elect pro-environmental candidates. Other top-tier environmental groups spent an additional \$100 million toward the same objective. Garrett Rose, a senior attorney for the Natural Resource Defense Council said the Trump Executive Order was "feeding America's forests to the chainsaws." Enter the Biden/Harris team.

President Biden quickly went to work with a climate-focused forestry agenda that championed conserving old growth timber, restoring forest ecosystems, and enhancing climate resilience. The administration's goals were formalized in EO14072, signed on Earth Day 2022. The Executive Order was titled "Strengthening the Nation's Forests, Communities, and Local Economies." By the title, one would think this order supported the same values espoused by President Bush's Healthy Forest Restoration



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Act, but one peel from the onion was all it took to expose the real emphasis: protection of an additional 112 million acres of “maturing” and old growth forests.

Environmental groups lauded EO14072, while the timber industry forewarned that the new heavy-handed federal policies would lead to more catastrophic wildfires, degraded fish and wildlife habitat, and endanger jobs and infrastructure. The Biden Administration ordered an inventory of all maturing and old growth timber on the National Forests. This inventory revealed an “inconvenient truth.” Since 2000, over 890,000 acres of old growth forests had been lost on public lands. The culprits? 79% lost from wildfire, 20% lost to insect and disease, and a mere 1% lost from logging. The old growth “protection” initiative was quietly dropped.

During the Biden/Harris Administration, an additional 26 million acres burned in wildfires, with over 300 fatalities and 35,000 structures destroyed.

America remained the leading importer of lumber in the world.

Against this backdrop, enter the Trump/Vance team in 2025. Their vision for our National Forests: make them safer, healthier, and more productive while maintaining the multiple-use objectives they were created for.

*"No national forest shall be established, except to improve and protect the forest within the boundaries, or for the purpose of securing favorable conditions of water flows, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of citizens of the United States..." Organic Administration Act of 1897*

How to do this . . . streamline environmental laws with policies leaning heavily toward common sense deregulation and resource extraction that still safeguards the resource. To achieve this, the Trump Administration issued multiple executive orders aimed at restoring sound forest management and reversing the dismantling of America’s timber industry.

There is certainly nothing new about the mainstream environmental groups’ reaction to President Trump’s agenda for our National Forests. Brett Hartl, governmental affairs director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said bluntly, “We’ll see them in court at some point. I think we’ll prevail on this.” Alex Craven, Forest Campaign Manager for the Sierra Club, sums up their viewpoint, “...wildlands across the country are on the chopping block. That means polluting our clean air and drinking water sources to pad the bottom line of timber and mining companies”. The environmental organizations are not simply protesting, they are mobilizing.



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Conversely, the timber industry is praising the Trump/Vance Administration's actions as long overdue correction to decades of mismanagement. The administration has been enthusiastic, strategic, and has framed their response around national security, economic revival, and catastrophic wildfire prevention. I share that enthusiasm, but "we've been here before."

Combining the wildfire statistics from 2002-2024: 168 million acres burned with the vast majority not replanted, 1,187 people died, and over 145,000 structures were destroyed. During that same time frame, hundreds of sawmills, paper mills, and biomass power plants were shut down. No tally is available on the innumerable flora and fauna lost.

Is there a way to stop this roller coaster forestry policy? Wouldn't it be best for America to establish a long-term bipartisan forest management policy that has the support of the majority of the legislature and the public? I think we will soon find out. After the carnage of the Southern California wildfires early this year, there is now bipartisan agreement that something is broken when it comes to our forest management policies.

Although the Los Angeles fires were predominantly brush fires fanned by 80 mph winds that turned them into an urban holocaust, they proved to be the catalyst that convinced a bipartisan group in the House to agree to a "fix" that came in the form of Congressman Bruce Westerman's "Fix Our Forests Act" (FOFA). The FOFA combines positive attributes of the previous four administrations' forest policy to: reduce wildfire threat; thin overcrowded forests; streamline environmental review; restore forest ecosystems; and reduce wildfire smoke that directly impacts health and releases unprecedented greenhouse gas emissions into our atmosphere.

The fate of the Fix Our Forests Act now lies in the hands of the Senate. A strong bipartisan duo, namely California Senator Alex Padilla (D) and Utah Senator John Curtis (R) are emerging as the leaders to get FOFA passed and onto President Trump's desk. Senator Curtis summarized their agreement on the FOFA well: "The bill works on how to prevent wildfires, how to deal with them while they happen, and how to deal with them after the fact." FOFA does promote just that, with increased forest thinning, direct attack on wildfire, salvaging burned timber, and replanting forests.

The Sierra Club, and over 100 other environmental groups, have launched their offensive against the FOFA. Sierra Club spokesperson, Anna Medema, warns, "What they [the Trump Administration officials] have shown is a consistent desire to hand over our national forests and public lands to billionaires and corporate polluters." This is the same dishonest fear mongering designed to push the public's hot buttons that has been used in the past.



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It's time to push back. We've been here before. If we lose our resolve to be good stewards of our National Forests, to make them healthy and vibrant, to return them to the very purpose they were created for, we'll be here again.

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This article was written by Mike Albrecht, Past President (2023-2025) of the American Loggers Council.

Mike Albrecht has a master's degree in forestry from Duke University, is a Registered Professional Forester in California, and has worked for 50 years in forest management and the forest products industry.

Mike served as president of the American Loggers Council from October 2023 to September 2025 and is a past president of Associated California Loggers and the Sierra Cascade Logging Conference.