Forest Service Plan: Clearcuts Help Stop Global Warming!

While a worried Congress creates a new committee on global warming, the Forest Service gives sparse attention to the planet's most pressing concern in its plan for the Tongass National Forest and even indicates that cutting old-growth forests will help stem greenhouse gasses.

For those of us living on the edge of the Tongass, the impacts of increasing temperatures have been noticeable.

Gale-force windstorms have doubled in number since 1950, hot summers have stranded salmon outside dried up streambeds, and outbreaks of tree-killing insects are beginning to plague forests.

Also, there has been a die-off of a half-million acres of yellow spruce, when declining snow pack freezes the cedars' root system.

Our glaciers are retreating. In higher elevations, soils are dryer. Two summers ago, we swam in the ocean for an hour and a half, as if we were in a pool in Palm Springs.

The Forest Service notes these "trends" in "climate change" but, like a puppy irresistibly humping the leg of its master, the Forest Service allocates its horny impulse to the logging industry.

The draft environmental impact statement (EIS) for the Tongass wants us to look at the bright side of global warming. "Not all changes have been negative," beams the environmental report. More rain than snow "has reduced the frequency of low-and moderate-elevation avalanches!" (Emphasis added.)

From the Forest Service's perspective, however, this means more hemlock in the upper reaches of the valley, and more forests to cut. Protecting forests from avalanches caused by roads and logging in steep drainages, meanwhile, does not warrant similar sanguine affirmations (e.g. "if we place restrictions on logging, think of all the acreage we'll save from avalanches!").

In a following section, the draft EIS raises the seemingly esoteric issue of *carbon sequestration*.

Any school kid knows that trees absorb carbon dioxide. By breathing on plants, we help them grow.

"Tut, tut," the Forest Service gives the impression of saying, "it's a bit more complex."

"The term 'carbon sequestration' refers to the removal of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and the long-term storage of carbon as trees or as wood products such as lumber," the planning document sniffs (note the inclusion, here, of "lumber").

And though it seems obvious that the more forests are left intact, the more carbon is sequestered, the EIS here again gives the appearance of the schoolmaster chortling and shaking his head.

“Carbon sequestration depends on tree growth and mortality. Newly planted forests accumulate carbon rapidly for several decades and then sequestration declines as trees mature and growth slows, resulting in less new wood being produced each year,” the report says.

Then, the clincher: “Old forests can release more carbon from decay than they sequester in new growth.”

So, old growth forests actually *contribute* to global warming.

“Harvesting large trees, storing the wood as lumber in buildings, and reforesting the area with young, fast-growing trees can add to the stockpile of stored carbon.”

Aha.

“This additional carbon sequestration is partially, and in some cases completely, offset by carbon released into the atmosphere due to the use of fossil fuel during harvest operations, log transportation, and processing.”

And, viola! Logging helps stop global warming!

“Now, children, time to go home and get out the chainsaw and ...”

But, wait. Isn’t most of the wood taken from the forest dissolved into pulp? And doesn’t the pulp quickly end up in landfills, or, worse, get burned?

And wasn’t there that study, published in the journal Science last November, that found soils in an old-growth forest in southern China are actually storing carbon at a rapid rate?

“I guess it’s solid evidence for the emerging consensus that old-growth forests are quite dynamic,” Christopher Field, director of the Carnegie Institution Department of Global Ecology at Stanford University told the Associated Press, “that they have high rates of growth, high rates of decomposition, and at any period the balance between those could result in a net carbon storage or net carbon loss.”

As with many of its reports, the Forest Service EIS for the Tongass is a flawed analysis that purports to understand as much about the changes the planet is undergoing as a result of global warming as does our reactionary Congressman Don Young.

So as one federal office considers dramatic action to stem the advance of global warming effects, another gears up to “manage” a forest with a plan that not only avoids

consideration of global warming but exaggerates its impacts by allowing enormous tracks of land to be clearcut, mined and suffused with motorized access.

Like the man who builds his house in a floodplain, the Forest Service is stumbling into the next 50 years with a blueprint for disaster.