

BOB DOPPELT

# Forest Service is slow to change, but must embrace climate role

By Bob Doppelt

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I first met Jim Furnish in the early 1990s, when he was the supervisor of the Siuslaw National Forest, and I work with him on a project now, so I was keenly interested in reading his new book, "Toward a Natural Forest: The Forest Service in Transition." It offers powerful lessons about how myopia and denial can lead to tragedy. His story also has important implications for our nation's ability to address climate change.

Furnish's U.S. Forest Service career began as a seasonal ranger in 1965 and ended in 2002 as deputy chief. He described the transition of the Forest Service from an agency totally committed to timber production with little regard for the environmental costs, to one that Furnish says is now more focused on fish, wildlife and recreation, but also uncertain of its mission.

According to Furnish, the demand for wood for home construction soared after World War II. The Forest Service responded by adapting a culture centered on maximizing the timber harvest.

As he worked in different locations around the country, Furnish came to realize that at its core the Forest Service "did not strongly identify with safeguarding basic resources as our primary responsibility."

Conservation of water quality, fish and wildlife habitat and scenic beauty was not central to its mission.

Instead, according to Furnish, despite growing environmental concerns, throughout the 1980s the Forest Service continued its “decades-long liquidation of the remaining old growth forests.”

Then, in 1991, U.S. District Court Judge William Dwyer issued an injunction that brought the massive clear-cutting of federal forests to a screeching halt. Furnish says that Dwyer’s decision “had the feeling of a meat locker door clunking shut behind you ... and then hearing the bolt lock in place.”

Furnish became supervisor of the Siuslaw around the time of Dwyer’s injunction. After the severe but long-overdue reduction in old growth logging, Furnish realized the need for a new type of management. Particularly interesting are the chapters describing his struggles to shift the direction of an agency that resented Dwyer’s decision and fiercely resisted change.

The Northwest Forest Plan became policy three years after the injunction. Well before that, Furnish had instituted a new approach on the Siuslaw. He decided the remaining old growth would not be cut. Timber harvest would focus on thinning old clear-cut areas that were now monoculture tree farms to allow them to grow into mature forests. Watersheds and salmon habitat would be restored.

These remain the primary focus of the Siuslaw today, though Furnish says not many forests locally or nationally have embraced this more ecological approach.

Furnish’s work drew the attention of Mike Domback, the new chief of the Forest Service, who appointed Furnish to be deputy chief.

In that role he helped craft the Roadless Area Conservation Rule that withdrew 58 million acres of the remaining undeveloped areas on national forests nationwide from timber harvest and road building. He also played a key role in updating the planning rules of the National Forest Management Act.

In pursuing these changes, he found the culture of the Forest Service itself to be the biggest obstacle.

One thing that stood out in reading the book is how much today’s controversy over climate change mirrors the hullabaloo that occurred over forest management in the late 1980s and ’90s.

Back then, many scientists, environmental groups and then the courts told the Forest Service that its practices caused serious environmental damage and that new approaches were required. However, agency personnel remained firmly wedded to their old ideology, denied the problems and demonized people who raised concerns.

Today, despite continuous warnings from climate scientists and ever-rising impacts from human-made climate disruption, the same patterns can be seen among people ideologically committed to business as usual.

Furnish's description of the Forest Service as still confused about its mission 25 years after Dwyer's injunction also stood out. The world is speeding toward civilization-altering climate disruption. By holding existing stocks of carbon and sequestering much more, national forests have a central role to play in preventing this catastrophe.

If agency leaders open their minds to what's happening, a new calling becomes clear: conserving and increasing forest carbon. This mission will produce tremendous economic, social and environmental benefits for everyone.

Furnish's book (see [towardanaturalforest.com](http://towardanaturalforest.com)) explains how difficult it is to alter the outdated thinking and rigid organizational culture of the Forest Service. It also offers important lessons for climate change.

Bob Doppelt directs The Resource Innovation Group and teaches about global warming at the University of Oregon.