Transitioning from forest restoration welfare to sustainable forest health:

Connecting the dots on New Mexico's most catastrophic wildfire season

From the Track, the Pacheco Canyon and the Las Conchas fires in the northern part of the state to the Miller, Quail Ridge, and Ruidoso Downs fires in the state's southern tier, New Mexico is emerging from its most severe wildfire season ever. Despite widespread damage, immediate post-burn assessments suggest that efforts to restore the health of our forests, including restoration thinnings, have been effective in cooling off some wildfires. Restoration efforts have also provided a safe and effective zone from which strategic fire suppression efforts have been successfully initiated. It is generally considered that a season like the one we just experienced will be more the norm than an exception. But what is the future of forest restoration and how will restoration efforts be enabled? Is the current model that relies on government subsidies sustainable or even desirable? If not, what are our options?

Most of New Mexico's forestland is administered by government agencies, with the USDA Forest Service (USFS) managing almost half of the state's forest and private entities, including Indian Trust land, owning 38 percent. Except for the state's most eastern counties, New Mexico's counties are located within 100 miles of a National Forest. Although mistakes are sometimes made in the management of all forests – public and private – none of this suggests that National Forests are poorly managed by those in the Forest Service regions, forests and districts who are charged with their stewardship. Agency policies are generally defined and constrained by external realities, such as shifting public values and preferences, environmental legislation and policies, and drastically reduced agency budgets, that are generally beyond the control of the forester making the decisions "on the ground."

Federally-funded programs have made great inroads toward restoring forests and landscapes, sometimes across landscapes and multiple landowner jurisdictions. However, restoration treatments come with a maintenance bill that is often ignored. That is, the effectiveness of these treatments is not permanent and, in many cases, "maintenance cycles" are poorly understood. Publicly-funded forest restoration programs should be viewed as ways to stimulate sustainable restoration-based economies, not replace them. The best outcome of these and similar programs would be the development of a strong, sustainable forestry sector that no longer relies on government subsidies and that enables forest restoration by providing markets to consume woody material from restoration thinnings and other harvests.

While the state's forest products industry is relatively small and most of these businesses employ fewer than ten people and together comprise less than one percent of the state's employment, forest products enterprises are critical to the economic well-being of many local forest-dependent businesses and forest-based communities. A strong forestry sector also helps to enable forest restoration efforts that are aimed at reducing the risk of severe wildfire and improving the health of the state's forest resources, while providing employment in some of the state's poorest rural areas.

However, despite the commitment of core individuals, agencies, and organizations, relatively little has been documented about the scope of the forestry sector in New Mexico and the challenges faced by the state's timber-dependent businesses. In 1997, researchers from the University of Montana conducted a statewide census of New Mexico's primary forest products industry. They found that timber-dependent businesses participating in the census processed nearly all of New Mexico's commercial timber harvest. The authors noted that the state's timber harvest had declined precipitously since the late 1980s, citing decreases in stumpage availability from National

Forests related to endangered species legislation, the listing of the Mexican spotted owl in 1993, and litigation directed at sales of timber from federally-managed lands. It has been the contention of others that New Mexico's forestry sector was already in a decline during this period.

Although relatively small in its statewide contribution to employment and revenue, New Mexico's forest products sector contributes significantly to both local forest-based communities and efforts to improve the health of the state's forest and woodland ecosystems. However, questions remain about present and future directions of the forest industry in New Mexico. A recent forest industry survey was conducted to document aspects of the forestry sector in New Mexico. Survey participants were also asked to rank the top three challenges to the state's forestry sector. While it cannot be discerned from the survey whether the economic climate and relatively recent downturn in housing at the time of the survey explained some responses or whether the most often cited impediments reflected a more persistent challenge to the state's forest products industry, *Lack of demand for forest products* received the most responses. Other important impediments included costs associated with insurance, federal regulations, lack of available raw material, and high fuel costs. In addition, lack of incentives for the public to use local forest products, environmental regulations and environmental groups, equipment costs, and a lack of a strong industry organization were often cited. Results have implications for the development of a viable and sustainable forest products industry in New Mexico. In addition, they may also represent pivot points for discussions aimed at developing implementable strategies for growth in the state's forestry sector.

The challenge related to a downturn in the forest products sector and its effects on rural economies, forest health and reducing wildfire danger is west-wide. For example, citing the loss of sawmill capacity in the northwest US, a recent article in a Washington state newspaper quoted an advisor to the US Agriculture Secretary as saying that "We need forest management for the health of the landscape and the economic stability of rural communities." According to Robert Bonnie with the USDA, the Forest Service (that is, the US tax payer) *will have to pay* to thin unhealthy, overcrowded stands in the Rocky Mountain West if the timber can't be sold to sawmills.

Unfortunately, resuscitating a reliable New Mexico timber harvesting work force won't happen overnight. Due to advances in harvesting mechanization, jobs in the logging sector, for example, are more likely to require skilled labor than brute force. In addition, studies elsewhere suggest that breakdowns in familial attachment associated with professions such as farming and logging threaten an immediate reinvigoration of the industry.

So, let's move the ball forward while at the same time learning from the past and how we got where we are. New Mexico needs healthy forests for water, wildlife, recreation, wood and fiber, and other commodity and non-commodity values. It also needs to protect its forests from catastrophic wildfire – for reasons related to forest health, public safety, and water yield and quality. Accomplishing this sustainably and, eventually, without public subsidies requires a strong local forest products sector that enables – that is, becomes the pull for – efforts directed at forest health and restoration practices that help mitigate the potential for severe wildfire. The push of public subsidies to achieve forest restoration objectives is likely not sustainable, and once the forest restoration grants dry up and the bills for future forest restoration maintenance come due, the state may find itself with a subsidy-dependent forest restoration culture and without a viable restoration-based economy.

And we will experience more devastating wildfires.

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