Conference Report

USDA FOREST SERVICE:
The Next 100 Years

A Conference On Fire & Forest Health

Conference Report

USDA FOREST SERVICE:
The Next 100 Years

FIRE AND FOREST HEALTH:
THE FOREST SERVICE'S CONTINUING MANAGEMENT
CHALLENGES IN THE NEW CENTURY

THURSDAY, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18-19, 2004
JORDAN BALLROOM, STUDENT UNION
BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

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The U.S. Forest Service is about to celebrate its 100th anniversary. It will host a national congress in early January of 2005, exactly 100 years after the first Forest Congress and subsequent to holding a series of regional conferences throughout the country. On November 18-19, 2004, the Andrus Center for Public Policy, the Idaho Statesman, and the Forest Service presented one of those conferences in Boise, Idaho. The topics for this conference were wildland fire and forest health.

Agenda

November 18, 2004, Thursday

8:30 AM

Welcome and Introduction
Governor Cecil D. Andrus, Chairman, The Andrus Center for Public Policy
Robert Kustra, Ph.D., President, Boise State University
Leslie Hurst, President and Publisher, *The Idaho Statesman*
David P. Tenny, Deputy Undersecretary for Forestry, U.S. Department of Agriculture

9:00 AM

Keynote Address: **"Facing the Flames: The Forest Service Takes on Fire"**
Stephen Pyne, Ph.D. Arizona State University, Tempe; Professor of Biology and Society Programs; widely recognized as the foremost expert on wildland fire, and author of the critically-acclaimed *Year of the Fires: The Story of the Great Fires of 1910* and, most recently, *Tending Fire: Coping with America's Wildland Fires*

9:45 AM

Audience Question-and-Answer Forum. Moderated by Governor Andrus

10:00 AM

Break

10:15 - 11:15 AM

Discussion: **The Paradox of Success: Can We Stand Much More?**
Moderated by Marc C. Johnson, President of the Andrus Center

Panelists:
Elizabeth Arnold, Western Correspondent, National Public Radio
An award-winning reporter who has covered America's public lands, environment, politics, economics, and culture

Rocky Barker, Environment Reporter for *The Idaho Statesman*
Author of several books, including *Saving All the Parts: Reconciling Economics and the Endangered Species Act* and *The Scorched Earth: How Fire in Yellowstone Changed America*, which will be published early next year

James A. Burchfield, Ph.D., Associate Dean of the College of Forestry and Conservation at the University of Montana, an expert in both forestry and rural sociology

Orville Daniels, U.S. Forest Service (Ret.), Former Supervisor of Lolo National Forest, pioneer in prescribed burns in national forests

Jim Fisher, Ph.D., Editorial Page Editor, *The Lewiston Tribune*; veteran political reporter, long-time observer of the activities and on-the-ground impact of the Forest Service

Tom Kenworthy, Distinguished journalist for *USA Today* and Denver Bureau Chief; reporter on western public lands and natural resource issues for 15 years for both the *Washington Post* and *USA Today*

Gray Reynolds, Deputy Chief, U.S. Forest Service (Ret.), currently President of the National Museum of Forest Service History

Tom Thompson, Deputy Chief, National Forest System, veteran of the Forest Service, formerly Deputy Regional Forester of the Rocky Mountain Region

11:20 AM	Audience Question-and-Answer Forum. Moderated by Marc Johnson
12:00 Noon	Luncheon served in Jordan Ballroom, ABC
12:15 PM	**Perspective from Congress:** U.S. Senator Larry Craig, (R., Idaho) (via satellite), Chairman of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Forestry and Public Lands Management. Introduced by David Tenny. Location: Jordan Ballroom, ABC
12:40 PM	Audience Question-and-Answer with Senator Craig. Moderated by Carolyn Washburn, Executive Editor, *The Idaho Statesman*
1:15 - 2:30 PM	Discussion: Things Could Get Worse: The Management Challenges Ahead. Moderated by John C. Freemuth, Ph.D., Professor of Political science, Boise State University and Senior Fellow at the Andrus Center *Panelists:* Hank Blackwell, Assistant Fire Chief, Santa Fe County, New Mexico Leader in establishment of Firewise Communities Timothy J. Brown, Ph.D., Associate Research Professor, Atmospheric Sciences Division, Desert Research Institute; expert on climatology and fire-weather relationships James L. Caswell, Administrator of the Idaho Office of Species Conservation, 33-year Forest Service veteran, former supervisor of the Clearwater National Forest, Chairman of the Strategic Issues Panel on Fire Suppression Costs of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council Walter E. Hecox, Ph.D., Professor of Economics at Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, specializes in courses and research related to regional resource and sustainable development questions as well as international economics issues Penelope Morgan, Ph.D., Professor of Forest Resources, University of Idaho, holds a doctorate in fire ecology and management, conducts research and publishes articles on subjects ranging from management implications of climate changes in the western Americas to landscape trends of pine forests in the northwest Jerry Williams, Director of Fire and Aviation Management, USDA Forest Service, Washington, D.C.
2:30 PM	Audience Question-and-Answer Forum. Moderated by Dr. Freemuth
2:45 PM	Break
3:00 - 4:15 PM	Discussion: **Things Could Get Better:** ***Imagining the National Forests in the New Century.*** Moderated by Dr. John Freemuth *Panelists:* Marc Brinkmeyer, Owner/President of Riley Creek Lumber, past Chairman of the Western Wood Products Association and past President of the Intermountain Forest Association W. Wallace Covington, Ph.D., Professor of Forest Ecology, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff; Director of NAU's Ecological Restoration Institute Louise Milkman, Director of Federal Programs, The Nature Conservancy, Arlington, Virginia Chad Oliver, Ph.D., Pinchot Professor of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Yale University; Director, Yale Global Institute for Sustainable Forestry Jonathan Oppenheimer, Idaho Conservation League, Fire Policy and Public Lands Management Analyst

4:15 PM	Audience Question-and-Answer Forum. Moderated by Dr. Freemuth
4:30 PM	Closing remarks by Governor Andrus and adjournment

November 19, 2004, Friday

8:30 AM	Welcome and Introduction by Governor Andrus
8:35 AM	**Remarks:** Jack G. Troyer, Regional Forester, Intermountain Region, U.S. Forest Service
8:45 AM	**Perspective from the Chief:** Dale Bosworth, Chief, U.S. Forest Service. A veteran of the Forest Service and of many western forests, including service as regional forester for both the Northern and Intermountain Regions
9:15 AM	Audience Question-and-Answer Forum. Moderated by Governor Andrus
9:30 AM	Break
9:45 - 11:00 AM	**Mission Impossible? A Debate About the Future Priorities for the Forest Service –** Debaters will consider this question: Resolved: *that the Forest Service should make forest health its top priority.* Moderated by Marc Johnson

Affirmative

Thomas Bonnicksen, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Forest Science, Texas A & M, author of *America's Ancient Forests: From Ice Age to the Age of Discovery*

R. Neil Sampson, President of the Sampson Group, Inc. and of Vision Forestry LLC, a consulting firm specializing in sustainable forest planning and forest land management; Executive Vice President of American Forests from 1984 to 1995, creator of the Global ReLeaf Program and the Forest Policy Center

Jack Ward Thomas, Ph.D., Professor of Wildlife Conservation at the University of Montana; nationally known wildlife biologist; 30-year veteran of the Forest Service, including 3 years as Chief; and author of the recently-published Journal of a Forest Service Chief

Negative

The Honorable Pat Williams, Senior Fellow, O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West at the University of Montana; educator; former nine-term Congressman for Montana

Chris Wood, Vice President for Conservation Programs, Trout Unlimited, Arlington, Virginia; formerly Assistant to Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck

Randal O'Toole, Economist, The Thoreau Institute. Author of *Reforming the Forest Service* and of dozens of studies and monographs on planning, environmental policy, and natural resource management issues

11:00 - 11:20 AM	Audience Question-and-Answer Forum. Moderated by Marc Johnson
11:20 AM	**Summing Up: The Next 100 Years.** Moderated by Marc Johnson

Steven B. Daley Laursen, Ph.D., Dean, College of Natural Resources, University of Idaho. Leader in applying theories and methods from leadership studies to the fields of natural resource public policy and environmental education

Dale Bosworth, Chief, U. S. Forest Service

Cecil Andrus, Chairman, Andrus Center for Public Policy, Boise, Idaho; Former Governor of Idaho and Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior in the Carter Administration

Noon	Conference adjourned by Governor Andrus

Summary of Conference Themes

The central need that emerged from the conference is for *communication*, communication between stake-holders and the agencies; between the Forest Service and the public; between the Forest Service and the media; and among the public, the Forest Service, Congress, and the media. Only when that has occurred can the kind of trust be built that will allow us to deal with the growing physical threats to our forests: wildfire, insect infestations, drought, climate change, demographics, and loss of open space.

"The way we work with people has changed over time. In particular, we've learned the need for more up-front public dialogue, public involvement, and collaboration in our decision-making." Dale Bosworth, Chief, U.S. Forest Service

Major Issues of the Conference

As the U.S. Forest Service prepares to celebrate this important anniversary, the nation's forests aren't what they used to be, or so it appears. Years of fire suppression, drought, and insect infestations have provoked what some assert is a forest health crisis. Although there appears to be agreement that our forests are not in the best of shape, there are very different views about what the causes of the crisis are, whether those causes have cures, and whether forest health should be the core of today's Forest Service mission. Lying behind that concern is the question of whether the Forest Service had restored enough trust among its many stakeholders to allow implementation of new policies on fire and forest health.

Setting the Stage

It was widely agreed, going into the conference, that many years of indiscriminate fire suppression have placed many forest types prone to catastrophic wildfire. It was also agreed that fire suppression has continued to be the policy even when fire scientists suggested that we rethink that policy.

The west is now clearly in the midst of a multi-year drought and of insect infestations. In addition, climate change and demographic changes may be altering western landscapes and rendering fire policy more complex than ever. Even with our best collaborative efforts, it may take years to show results, and those results may be limited by events beyond our control.

The conference participants were aware of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, recently passed by Congress, as the latest attempt to do something about the conditions of our national forests. The Forest Service views this legislation as perhaps its best (and some inside the bureau ruefully say "last") opportunity to show that it has the tools, commitment, and leadership to manage our national forests. Everyone continues to watch to see how the legislation is implemented. For now, there is only cautious agreement on where and how to proceed with that implementation.

The opening speaker, Dr. Stephen Pyne, Professor of Biology and Society Programs at Arizona State University, commented that the conference "brought together an extraordinary assemblage of fire lore — literally thousands of years of fire experience in one room." This report summarizes the themes that emerged from the presentations and panels.

Issues and Themes

Theme No. 1

The Forest Service cannot act effectively unless it is trusted. The age of uncritical deference to expertise has ended. By the same token, if the Service performs well, the public should be willing to give the agency some breathing room to move.

To frame his remarks, Dave Tenny, the Deputy Undersecretary for Forestry in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, used the theme of trust, the kind that is given as an expression of confidence but that also still requires collaboration and critical questioning. The issue underlies all of our questions about fire and forest health. Do we trust the Forest Service to deal with those questions? How much of a free hand do we give it? What is the role of the media, elected officials, scientists, and others?

"It's an active kind of trust. It requires engagement. It requires collaboration and hard work. It involves asking critical questions at appropriate times about whether we are doing enough or doing the right things at the right pace."

David Tenny, Deputy Undersecretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Theme No. 2

The success of a new fire policy will require a new "fire story," one that clearly expresses the complexity of the issues. The Forest Service should task its public affairs staff to develop a new, clear, and understandable narrative and disseminate it effectively to editors and policy makers around the country.

Dr. Pyne, one of the country's most respected experts on the historical and cultural influences on wildland fire, took us through a history of the various fire eras up to present time. Fire was a traumatic influence on the new Forest Service, a "founding menace" that the empowered agency was "eager to fight. But that zealotry was their power, their glory, and their *ironic undoing*."

Today, we are facing a new "big burn," large fires to be sure, but not like those of 1910, which initiated the era of large-scale fire suppression. The fires of today are greatly influenced by mankind's own big burn, "anthropogenic combustion," industrial use that is causing enough climate change to alter fire regimes everywhere. The question of what to do about those fires leads to intense debate. In Dr. Pyne's words:

"The perception among the fire community is that the nation has a deficit of "good burns," that the way to solve this shortfall is to reinstate fire across the board, and that the public is unable to absorb anything other than a much simplified message. This time, dissent focuses on whether fire management should be based on the ax or the torch. The great achievement of this era of reformation is surely the indelible bonding of fire to land management. It is testimony to the complexity of that concept that we have no story sufficient to tell what it means."

Stephen J. Pyne, Ph.D., Regents' Professor, School of Life Sciences, Arizona State University

During a question-and-answer session with the audience, Pyne suggested that one key in telling a new fire story would be linking fire policy to a more explicitly biological framework, moving past a "physical problem that needs physical countermeasures." That framework would need to show that fire was accomplishing an ecological goal that only fire could do.

Theme No. 3

The media have a responsibility in telling the "new story" of fire as a land management tool.

Panel moderator Marc Johnson, President of the Andrus Center, began the first panel, "The Paradox of Success," by noting that the Forest Service was the "victim of its own success in controlling fire." How to help the bureau move into a new era was the question before the panel.

Reporting on large wildfires is one thing, but reporting on the relationship of fire to forest health and the resultant debate over the tools and methods to deal with it is another. Commenting on the difficulty of telling this story to the public and to Congress, Elizabeth Arnold of National Public Radio suggested that the agency had to work on telling the new fire story in ways that the media could use. Rocky Barker of the *Idaho Statesman* thought that the new message ought to include the fact that fire "is", rather than its being good or bad. Although the old message on fire was told clearly by Smoky the Bear, the new message may be more difficult to convey in clear and concise terms.

Retired Forest Supervisor Orville Daniels said that others need to help tell the story and that the issue transcended the Forest Service's ability to solve on its own. It needs political support from the entire society. As he said, "You don't move without others." Dr. James Burchfield of the University of Montana thought that a little contrition about past mistakes might help build that support.

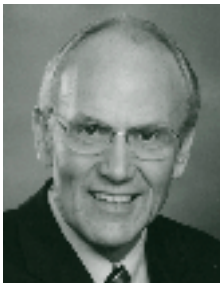
Theme No. 4

Fire use will continue to create issues with smoke and smoke management, issues that will be contentious. As the Andrus Center said in its 2000 report on fire, fire's biological necessity must be reconciled with legitimate concerns over smoke.

Gray Reynolds, a former Deputy Chief and Regional Forester, reminded the audience of the difficulty in gaining public support for prescribed fires that lead to smoke in the air, even though that was the historical norm.

Tom Thompson, Deputy Chief of the National Forest System acknowledged that the government-wide culture of fire suppression needs to be re-examined. He also cautioned that a "let-burn" fire that grew out of control might make that cultural change difficult to sell to the public.

"It's not just threats to people and their property; it's also smoke and the health and visibility hazards associated with smoke." Dr. Penny Morgan, University of Idaho



Theme No. 5

Forest health is the new Forest Service task. Timber harvest must be part of that task, and the agency should be allowed to produce some timber harvest revenue that is dedicated to forest health work and helps replace General Fund monies that will not be available. This must be accomplished in a transparent way.

This was the theme of remarks made by Idaho Senator Larry Craig, Chairman of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Forestry and Public Lands Management. He expressed hope that the Healthy Forest Restoration Act would work toward restoring trust throughout the forest policy community and "that all interests could see the value of urban watersheds, would put as a third or fourth tier value the commercial uses as they relate to our forests, and would do so in an open and public process."

"Let's remember that during the decade of the 90's when we brought the level of public timber harvest down nearly 80%, we basically turned the Forest Service into a red-ink agency..."

Larry Craig, U.S. Senator

Theme No. 6

Some of our best efforts on fire and forest health will be inhibited by climate change and demographic factors, about which there is little consensus.

Theme No. 7

Incentives for suppression, prescribed fire, and treatments often conflict with incentives for new homes and growth in interface areas. Homeowners need to share the responsibility for fire prevention and suppression.

The first afternoon panel, "Things Could Get Worse," was envisioned as a sobering check on any expectations that fire reduction and forest health would be easily accomplished. Prominent climatologist, Dr. Tim Brown of the Desert Research Institute, noted that there is scientific consensus that we are in the midst of climate change. For the west in the 21st Century, this means a warmer winter, less snow pack but more precipitation, and warmer summers. Drought will continue, comparable to the period of the 1930's or 1950's. In Dr. Brown's understated summary, he said, "This will be the challenge for management."

"There is scientific consensus that we are in the midst of climate change, both globally and regionally... The next 15 to 30 years have a higher probability of being dry in the west than the five or seven years we've been through."

Dr. Timothy Brown, Desert Research Institute

Dr. Penny Morgan, Professor of Forest Resources at the University of Idaho, commented that fire was more of a social and political issue than a biological one. Where "we act" on the forest must be within the zone of agreement with the public, and she suggested that the back country might be a place where fire could be used as a tool of land management.

Jim Caswell, director of the Idaho Office of Species Conservation and a former Forest Service supervisor, agreed and added that the fire culture still placed undue emphasis on suppression

rather than on the use of fire, suppressing fires that could have been allowed to burn. Planning for forest treatment was done conservatively because of budget concerns, and many areas were left untreated with the expectation that they would ultimately burn and be paid for with the "blank check" of fire suppression monies.

Dr. Walter Hecox of Colorado College, provided a perspective on western growth and western illusions, noting that many newcomers came west looking for the Marlboro cowboy world. Instead, we see growth in the service economy, second-home ownership that turns over every seven years, and new wildland/urban neighborhoods that do not like smoke and expect fire suppression.

Hank Blackwell, Assistant Fire Chief of Santa Fe County, New Mexico, stressed the importance of partnerships among federal, state, and local entities in attacking the fire and health problem. He did not spare homeowners and suggested that "we shouldn't reward a community for burning itself down."

Jerry Williams, Director of Fire and Aviation Management, called for attention to a bigger issue: managing and sustaining fire adaptive ecosystems, which would encourage a focus on building codes and trade-offs among clean air, endangered species, and watersheds.

Theme No. 8

Collaboration with affected communities is essential for success. People close to the national forests should be part of deciding the desired future of the ecosystem.

Theme No. 9

Collaborative efforts should have "teeth" that could contribute to building trust at the local level and avoiding the problem of an after-the-fact veto.

The intent of the day's last panel, "Things Could Get Better," was to point in the direction needed for successful policy development and change. Louise Milkman, Director of Federal Programs for the Nature Conservancy, encouraged public participation and pointed to a project on the Bayou Ranger District in the Ozark National Forest where the Forest Service worked hard with the community and gained the support of "pretty much everyone."

"If we could get legal determinations from the Supreme Court on some of these issues, it would simplify the work of the Forest Service. Right now... as soon as somebody comes in and raises an appeal, everything stops."

Gray Reynolds, Former Deputy Chief, U.S. Forest Service

Other speakers also stressed the importance of community. Dr. Chad Oliver, Director of the Yale Global Institute for Sustainable Forestry, emphasized the importance of creating "vibrant" communities, and Dr. Wally Covington, Professor of Forest Ecology at Northern Arizona University, thought the number one task of the Forest Service was to "restore and enhance the economic, ecological, and *social integrity*" of greater ecosystems. In his view, guiding principles could be articulated at regional levels, but discussed and implemented at local levels. The communities and the public must be equal participants.

Both Marc Brinkmeyer, President of Riley Creek Lumber, and Jonathon Oppenheimer of the Idaho Conservation League took the discussion back to the need for trust in order to be able to find areas of agreement. Brinkmeyer called for collaborative efforts to include "teeth" that could build trust at the local level, avoiding the "after-the-fact, outsider veto" that often derails collaborative effort.

Theme No. 10

Outdoor recreation and ecological restoration should be the agency's top priorities within the context of the Chief's list of the four major threats to the forests.

Theme No. 11

We should act first in areas where agreement exists.

That was the message from Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth at the opening of the second day of the conference. He noted, however, that the definition of a "restored" forest would depend more on a societal consensus than on a scientific one. More specifically, places where communities, the agencies, and the landowners have "come to some agreement should be the highest priority areas for forest work."

"The larger public lands policy issue for at least 40 million acres in the west is how are we going to manage and sustain resilient, fire-adaptive ecosystems? Until we address that larger public lands policy issue, I think we're going to continue to find ourselves at stalemate over science."

Jerry Williams, Director of Fire and Aviation Management, USDA Forest Service

Chief Bosworth said that debates over timber harvest, grazing, and road-building were distractions that led us away from more important issues, such as the four threats facing the forest system: fuel buildup, invasive species, unmanaged recreation, and loss of open space.

Building consensus on forest restoration clearly implies active conversations with the various publics that are concerned with forest policy. As the Chief said, "There remains public distrust of what is called 'active forest management.'" Later in the day, Dr. Tom Bonnicksen, Professor Emeritus of Forest Science from Texas A&M, remarked that those leading the conversation need to be as "charismatic and persuasive as Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot were 100 years ago."

Theme No. 12

"Forest Health" is a useful concept, but it requires a publicly-accepted definition and a community-centered monitoring process that can help evaluate implementation.

This panel was constructed to provide an entertaining, thoughtful, and useful "debate" about whether the Forest Service ought to make forest health its top priority. Panelists were asked to speak for the affirmative or the negative position on the question: Resolved: that the Forest Service should make forest health its top priority.

Neil Sampson, President of the Sampson Group and former Executive Vice President of American Forests, took the lead for the affirmative, arguing that forest health needed to be clearly defined in a way that won the day for the active management perspective and that it was the best way to frame the management issue. He agreed with the Chief that the forest health issue transcended national forest lands. He was also concerned that newcomers to the woods often did not understand that forests were not frozen in time and not always green.

Jack Ward Thomas, in some tongue-in-cheek comments, painted a scenario that made clear that a forest health policy can have unforeseen consequences, i.e., a lot more homes and people in the woods, raising more urban/wildland interface problems and more expectation of fire suppression. Dr. Bonnicksen offered one definition of what he called forest *restoration*: "restoring ecologically and economically sustainable native forests that are representative of historic landscapes, significant in America's history and culture, also serving society's contemporary need for wood products and other forest services."

Congressman Pat Williams, nine-term Montana congressman, objected to a forest health mission for the Forest Service if it meant exemptions from regulations, public review, and an appeals process. Chris Wood of Trout Unlimited argued that the forest health question was really about values and urged that people pay close attention to the values contained within roadless areas. He stressed the need for fire as a land management tool in roadless areas rather than thinning and building new roads to allow thinning.

Randal O'Toole of the Thoreau Institute suggested that everyone remember the importance of incentives in affecting agency missions, especially the power of the budget to affect the priorities of the Forest Service. The so-called fire suppression "blank check" was, he thought, an incentive that led the agency not to worry about cost or choice when suppressing fire. He offered three suggestions for how the incentive structure might be changed: allowing the Forest Service to charge for various uses, governing under a fiduciary trust model, and forming a "friends of the forest" advisory board for each forest.

Summing Up: the Next 100 Years

Governor Cecil D. Andrus, Chairman of the Andrus Center; Chief Bosworth; and Dr. Steven Daley Laursen, Dean of the College of Natural Resources at the University of Idaho, provided closing comments. Dean Daley Laursen suggested that our culture had changed enough that we should consider new models of decision-making. He suggested that the change be in the direction of deliberative democracy, born from the ground up, rather than continuing our current command-and-control regulatory approaches. That may begin to occur as we learn more about ecological processes and about how to put various outcomes together, such as jobs and environmental services, rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive.

Governor Andrus called for people to communicate and work together but also reminded everyone that we still had to make choices and that not every acre of land could be open to every use. Chief Bosworth agreed, stressing the need for communicating, finding common ground, and changing the incentives that people work under. He gave hope that this conference was an example of people beginning to work toward those three goals.

Conclusion

What we are really doing behind our concern for fire and forest health is imagining how we want our forests to look by the end of this still-young century. Stakeholders who care about the national forests and all Americans must come to some agreement and to understand what the economic, political, social, and ecological limits might be to reaching that vision.

As we celebrate the centennial of the U.S. Forest Service, the country should remember and appreciate what the Forest has done and continues to do well. We need to learn what has not gone so well, why that has happened, and what is being done or can be done to change that.

Gifford Pinchot's stricture to look for the "greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time" can still serve as a signpost to finding that vision.

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