

We served national forests under both parties, and know today our public lands are in danger (Opinion)

Divesting our public lands from public ownership would be a grievous error



Collectively, we have over 200 years of experience in public land management and have served as U.S. Forest Service chiefs under both Republican and Democratic administrations.

We are adamant that divesting our public lands from public ownership would be a grievous error. We encourage all Americans to support the public servants who work for you and, most importantly, the public lands that belong to all of us and define us as Americans.

This year started with the catastrophic fires in southern California. It is now only spring, and already we have an active fire season across parts of the southeast. Is this a time to dismiss thousands of trained firefighters? Most U.S. Forest Service employees have collateral firefighting jobs and are called on as fire season escalates.

We believe that the current administration's abusive description of career federal employees is an unforced and, frankly, unforgettable error. These fired employees, we know from experience, represent the best of America. Many gave up other potentially financially lucrative jobs to serve the public interest, many were military veterans. To see them treated the way they have been over the past few months is incompetence at best and mean-spirited at worst.

There was the random firing of some 3,400 probationary Forest Service employees, some with years of experience as seasonal firefighters, others with jobs ranging from managing prescribed fire and fuel reduction, timber sale layout, fish and wildlife habitat improvement to campground maintenance. This was followed by a court order to reinstate the fired employees, who were only soon to be fired again. Additionally, there was the buyout and retirement incentives of another 3,000 employees.

While the exact numbers are changing daily, the chaotic approach resulted in many of the top leaders, including the Forest Service chief and another dozen top agency leaders to leave or be demoted. Further, major reductions in the workforce are expected. The administration has asked USDA to significantly cut more funding and people.

This is occurring while a recent Executive Order calls for the immediate expansion of timber harvest from the National Forests and other federal public lands.

If the White House continues to dismiss the employees who manage the campgrounds, visitor information centers, trails systems for hiking, biking, horseback riding and motorized uses, facilities will have to be closed. The summer vacation season is just around the corner. Permit holders for animal grazing, oil and gas leases, logging and mining activities will also be affected. It appears the intent is to create a number of crises for the millions of Americans who use

the national forests and grasslands for their livelihoods and for their recreation. Rural economies are intertwined with the uses on these lands, bringing millions of dollars to local economies.

Are these drastic actions the first steps toward crippling the agencies so they cannot carry out their Congressionally mandated mission? If so, they portend a cynical effort to divest and transfer federal public lands to the States and private interests.

The national forests are public lands that are owned collectively by all U.S. Citizens and managed under the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act and a host of other laws. These laws allow for responsibly managed oil and gas development, mining, timber harvest, as well as recreation development, untouched wilderness, and many other uses. Most importantly, they are the backyard of families that camp, hike, bike, cut firewood, ski, float rivers, hunt or fish on their public lands without “no trespassing” signs.

More than 60 million Americans get their drinking water from streams that flow from the 193 million acres of national forests. Truly, we have a federal public land system in the U.S. that serves us daily and is the envy of natural resource professionals around the world for the benefits realized by our citizens daily. Divestiture of these precious lands, that belong to all citizens rich and poor, would be an irreparable tragedy.

The first Forest Service Chief Gifford Pinchot famously wrote, “Where conflicting interests must be reconciled, the question shall always be answered from the standpoint of the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run.” We believe the greatest good is keeping the National Forests and all federal public lands in the hands of all citizens for future generations.

The six authors of this column served as U.S. Forest Service chiefs between 1997 and 2025. Mike Dombeck (1997-2001), Dale Bosworth (2001-2007), Gail Kimbell (2007-2009), Tom Tidwell (2009-2017), Vicki Christiansen (2018-2021), Randy Moore (2021-2025).