

McClintock has choice words for U.S. Forest Service

Publisher's note: Tom McClintock, R-Granite Bay, delivered the following remarks Jan. 7 on the House floor about National Forests and the U.S. Forest Service. McClintock represents the California side of Lake Tahoe in the House of Representatives.

Much of my district comprises forests managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Over the last two years, I have received a growing volume of complaints protesting the increasingly exclusionary and elitist policies of this agency.

These complaints charge the Forest Service, among other things, with:

- Imposing inflated fees that are forcing the abandonment of family cabins held for generations;
- Charging exorbitant new fees that are closing down long-established community events upon which many small and struggling mountain towns depend for tourism;
- Expelling long-standing grazing operations on specious grounds – causing damage both to the local economy and the federal government's revenues; and
- Obstructing the sound management of our forests through a policy that can only be described as benign neglect, creating both severe fire dangers and massive unemployment.

Practiced in the marketplace, we would renounce these tactics as predatory and abusive. In the public service sector, they are intolerable.

Combined, these actions evince an ideologically driven hostility to the public's enjoyment of the public's land – and a clear intention to deny the public the responsible and

sustainable use of that land.

Most recently, the Forest Service has placed severe restrictions on vehicle access to the Plumas National Forest, despite volumes of public protests. Supervisor Bill Connelly, chairman of the Butte County Board of Supervisors, writes that, "The restriction applies to such activities as: collecting firewood, retrieving game, loading or unloading horses or other livestock, and camping." He writes, "The National Forests are part of the local fabric. The roads within the National Forests are used by thousands of residents and visitors for transportation and recreation. These activities generate revenue for our rural communities, which are critical for their survival."

This is not a small matter. The Forest Service now controls 193 million acres within our nation – a land area equivalent to the size of Texas.

During the despotic eras of Norman and Plantagenet England, the crown declared one-third of the land area of Southern England to be the royal forest, the exclusive preserve of the monarch, his forestry officials and his favored aristocrats. The people of Britain were forbidden access to and enjoyment of these forests under harsh penalties. This exclusionary system became so despised by the people that in 1215, five clauses of the Magna Carta were devoted to redress of grievances that are hauntingly similar to those that are now flooding my office.

The attitude that now permeates the U.S. Forest Service from top to bottom is becoming far more reminiscent of the management of the royal forests during the autocracy of King John than of an agency that is supposed to encourage, welcome, facilitate and maximize the public's use of the public's land in a nation of free men and women.

After all, that was the vision for the Forest Service set

forth by its legendary founder, Gifford Pinchot in 1905: “to provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run.”

In May of 2009 and April of 2010, some of my California colleagues and I sent letters to the Forest Service expressing these concerns. I have also personally met with senior officials of that agency on several occasions in which I have referenced more than 500 specific complaints of Forest Service abuses received by my office.

All that I have received to date from these officials are smarmy assurances that they will address these concerns – assurances that their own actions have belied at every turn.

It is time for Congress to conduct a top-to-bottom review of the abuses by this increasingly unaccountable and elitist agency, to demand accountability for the damage it has done – and is doing – to our forests’ health, to the public’s trust, to the government’s revenues and to the nation’s economy – and to take whatever actions are necessary to restore an attitude of consumer-friendly public service which was Gifford Pinchot’s original vision and for which the U.S. Forest Service was once renowned and respected.