

Opinion: USFS still in search of a mission

By Jim Furnish, High Country News

Perhaps Ken Burns had the right idea when he named his public-television series “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea”. Even though I worked for the Forest Service for 34 years, I’m inclined to agree with him about the importance of our nation’s parks. But the national forests are surely our second-best idea, a priceless asset despite the call from some Westerners to sell off our forests and privatize them.

It is sad to admit that the battles over logging, grazing, mining and recreation fees have never stopped. Forests go up in smoke or fall prey to insect epidemics while critics complain about how ineffective and wayward the Forest Service has become. In some ways, it is the agency’s own fault.

The Forest Service enjoyed broad support as a “can do” agency in the post-WWII logging era, but its glacial response to the environmental movement dried up a reservoir of legitimacy and trust and created huge problems, perhaps best exemplified by the spotted owl crisis in the Pacific Northwest. I recall vividly when a federal judge determined that agency officials had willfully broken endangered species laws in their determination to protect logging interests. As Orville Daniels, the former supervisor of the Lola National Forest, put it, the Forest Service had gone over to the “dark side.”

The agency has found it difficult to right itself since then, and it still struggles to create a clear purpose and mission for the 21st century – one that resonates with the public it serves.

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