

March 9, 2005

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“The Greatest Good” = Forest Service Propaganda

By Steve Holmer

In the aftermath of revelations that the Bush administration has been paying off journalists to promote its agenda, it shouldn't be a surprise to learn that additional taxpayer dollars are being wasted by a federal agency to promote its public image. The Forest Service, which last year hired a PR firm to mislead the public about its plan to triple logging levels in California's Sierra Nevada, is at it again with their new film "*The Greatest Good*."

It is unfortunate that what could have been an informative history of the National Forests has been slanted by Forest Service officials in an attempt to dodge discussion of current controversies and past mistakes. By selectively telling the history of National Forest management the agency has turned "*The Greatest Good*" into base propaganda. The film, which cost taxpayers well over one million dollars to produce in direct costs and staff time, tries to boost the image of the Forest Service and imply that the agency is always on target with its management decisions.

Too much of the agency's past and continuing mismanagement are glossed over in the film, and many of the most important issues of the past three decades are ignored altogether, because they don't fit into the picture that the agency wants the public to see. It fails to mention that the Forest Service repeatedly misled the public about the sustainability of its actions and knowingly violated environmental laws to get the cut out during the 60's, 70's and 80's, that it has left future generations saddled with billions of dollars in future restoration needs, or that 95% of the old growth forests have been destroyed and dozens of fish and wildlife species put at risk of extinction by their actions.

The film completely fails to discuss one of the most significant laws affecting forest management, the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976, banning clearcutting on the National Forest except under exceptional circumstances, giving the public greater say in how the forests are managed, and increasing protections for wildlife. Perhaps NFMA receives so little attention in the film (it briefly appears in a graphic listing of environmental laws) because this is a law that the Forest Service and White House are intent on gutting. The agency recently finalized new forest planning regulations implementing the law that eliminate most of the requirements for public involvement and environmental protection found in the law and past regulations.

Another glaring omission concerns roadless areas and roads management. The film does offer some criticism that the agency wasn't allocating enough Wilderness under roadless surveys completed during the 1970's, but then offers no further discussion of an issue that has dominated the forest management debate for the past 20 years. There is no mention of the \$10 billion road maintenance backlog which is perhaps the most significant example of agency mismanagement and the legacy of past overcutting.

It also fails to mention the Roadless Area Conservation Rule of 2001, the most popular conservation measure the agency ever implemented as measured by public comments, that protects 58.5 million acres of undeveloped forests. Again, perhaps this issue receives no mention because the agency and administration are working overtime to eliminate the roadless protection rule and renew development in these areas. The Forest Service is now moving forward with plans for dozens of roadless area logging and energy development proposals in Alaska, Oregon, Colorado, Wyoming, Colorado, California, Idaho, and Virginia.

More self serving rhetoric is offered when the film suggests that the era of intensive resource extraction is over and by the current Chief of the Forest Service Dale Bosworth who states that the next era of agency management will focus on restoration. The film makes no mention that this year the agency continues to liquidate some of the last of the ancient forests in the Northwest, including areas that are supposed to be wildlife preserves, and has fifty logging plans underway in roadless areas that will destroy priceless rainforests in Alaska's Tongass National Forest.

The film concludes with a statement that the Forest Service will continue to work to use and manage and protect the lands and waters and seek the greatest good in the next century. I'm sure the public would like to believe this is true. But given the dishonesty seen repeated over the last half century, the lack of protection for endangered ecosystems and wildlife, the continued destruction of old growth forests and roadless areas, and this use of propaganda, it hardly seems believable.

Steve Holmer received a degree in history from Pennsylvania State University and recently authored "A Conservation History of the National Forests" to mark the Forest Service centennial.

The Screening Schedule for "The Greatest Good" is available at:
<http://www.fs.fed.us/greatestgood/film/screens.shtml?sub2>

For more information, please see "A Conservation History of the National Forests" at
http://www.americanlands.org/documents/1102356650_nfconservationhistory.pdf

The Unified Forest Defense Campaign is a coalition of national and regional conservation organizations that includes Defenders of Wildlife, NRDC, The Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, Earthjustice, National Environmental Trust, US PIRG, American Lands Alliance, Northwest Old Growth Campaign, National Forest Protection Alliance, Alaska Rainforest Campaign, Center for Biological Diversity and Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness.