Mission Possible

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The US Forest Service often is described, inside and outside the organization, as adrift, without a clear mission. Conflicting legislation is a large factor, but self-induced perception may be part of the problem. It’s time to take a hard look at the federal agency’s governing laws.

The 1897 Organic Act, which established the Forest Service says: “No national forest shall be established, except to improve and protect the forest within the boundaries, or for the purpose of securing favorable conditions of water flows, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of citizens of the United States...”

It’s a bit more complicated than that simple, clean language. The Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960 (MUSY) says this: “It is the policy of the Congress that the national forests are established and shall be administered for outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed and wildlife and fish purposes. The purposes of this act are declared to be supplemental to, but not in derogation of, the purposes for which the national forests were established as set forth in Section 475 (Organic Act) of this title.” Emphasis added.

MUSY goes on to define Multiple Use and Sustained Yield:

“Multiple use’ means: The management of all the various renewable surface resources of the national forests so that they are used in the combination that will best meet the needs of the American people...”

“Sustained yield of the several products and services’ means the achievement and maintenance in perpetuity of a high-level annual or regular periodic output of the various renewable resources of the national forests without the impairment of the productivity of the land.”

Thus, Congress established its view of federal land management over the last century. It is not vague, complicated or equivocal. It does not cater to individual constituencies; it is not beholden to any single resource use. It’s just ignored. Why?

A swamp of environmental laws and procedural goo engulf the agency. The Forest Service spends so much time in the political woodshed that both critics and employees assume National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA) etc., trump the Organic Act, MUSY, National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA) etc. While nothing could be further from the truth, ask yourself how long it’s been since someone referred to the Organic Act or the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act...

Environmental and procedural law, such as ESA and NEPA, affect USFS activities, just as they do all public and private land managers. Some citizens and many USFS employees choose to believe that ESA implementation is the Forest Service mission. It is not. The Organic and Multiple Use Sustained Yield Acts clearly reflect Gifford Pinchot’s and Theodore Roosevelt’s federal land management vision. ESA, and other laws, make that vision difficult to achieve, but they do not negate it.

Congress eventually will amend conflicting legislation, but that’s another discussion. The perception problem, however, can be solved from within the agency.

Forest Service leaders cannot just place Congressional direction on a wall and expect everyone to “get it,” but an old saying is appropriate: “The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.” Every Forest Service desk should exhibit the Organic Act’s two sentences. Every meeting ought to begin with a recitation from the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act. More realistically, all USFS websites should highlight Organic and Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act directives with an explanation of how that direction came about.

Forest Service plan revisions currently in process with new regulatory standards in place are another place to make the point. The new regulations are strategic and goal driven; they will be completed in two or three years versus being a career project; focus will be on goals, such as acres treated; progress toward achieving goals will be measured. “Accountability” is a new word in today’s Forest Service. The obvious missing piece is a mandate from Congress.

In an “old meets new” scenario, the above-quoted Organic and Multiple Use Sustained Yield Acts are well-suited companions to planning directives. The two MUSY definitions also belong in forest plans because they set clear expectations in a sea of poorly defined, fuzzy terms.

Forest Service employees and all citizens need to see the USFS mission in print to remind us that Congress has clear expectations, regardless of complicating legislation. And we all need to be reminded that the mandate has endured a century of changing demands on our federal forestlands.

Neither Gifford Pinchot nor T.R. would concede, if they were still here, that the agency has a confused mission. The Forest Service has a proud, can-do history; the core standards remain intact despite profound change over the past two decades. Most foresters want to believe in the organization and its leadership in our profession. The best way to begin the journey is to rediscover the agency’s roots, its foundation, as the Forest Service prepares for its second century. It’s there and all we have to do is use it.

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