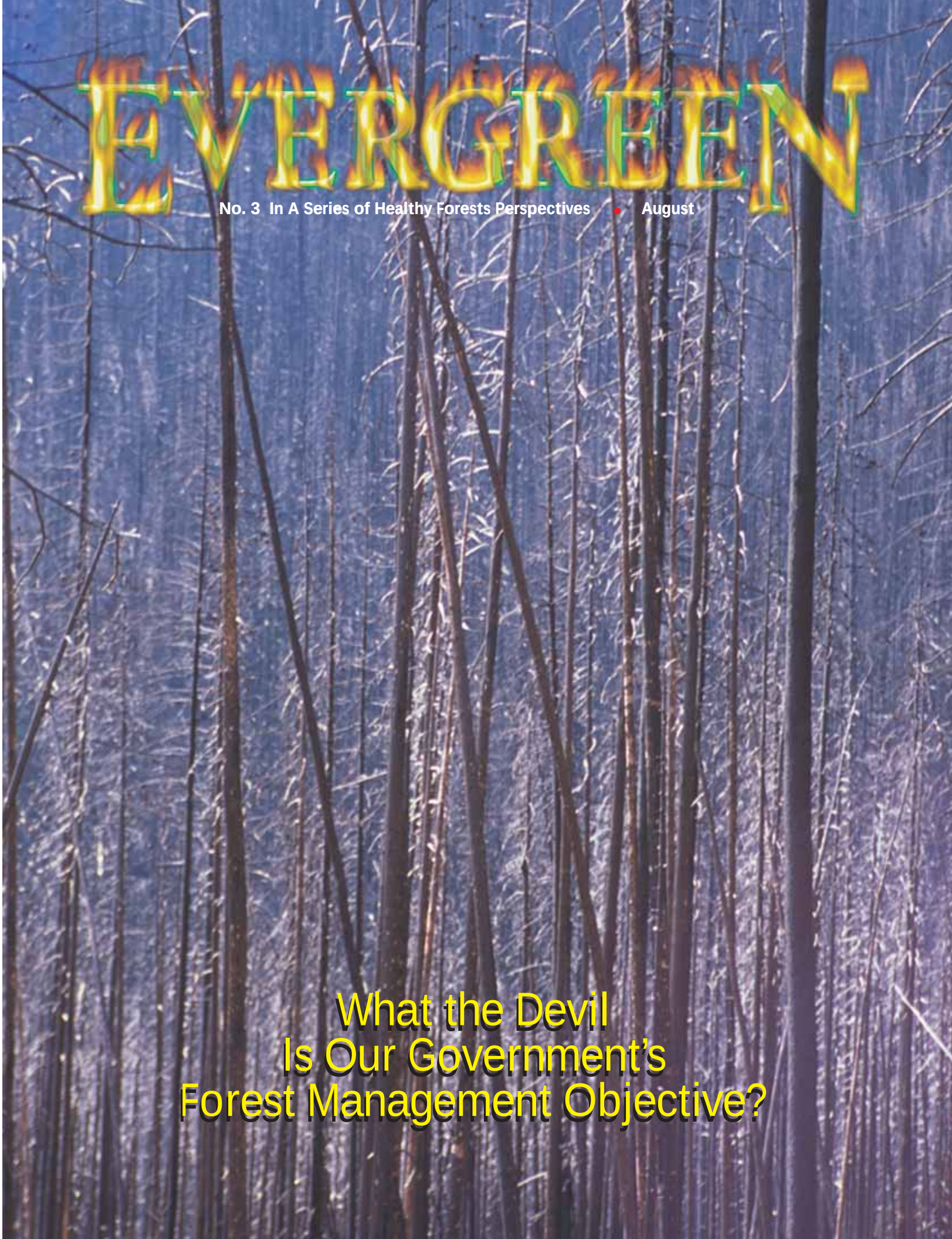

No. 3 In A Series of Healthy Forests Perspectives • August

What the Devil Is Our Government's Forest Management Objective?

"The only thing being protected in the public's forests today is the political influence of environmental groups…"

An essay by Jim Petersen

Does anyone know what our federal government's forest management objective is? I don't—and I've been trying to figure it out since 1985.

My friend Jack Ward Thomas, who was Chief of the Forest Service during the Clinton years, once told me he thought the objective was to conserve plant and animal species associated with old growth forests. That would be fine, but we've burned up so much old growth habitat in recent years, without attacking the underlying causes of this calamity, that I'm no longer sure what our objective is.

Is it important that we have a federal forest management objective? I think so. Nature is indifferent to human need. And we clearly have a great many needs where our national forests are concerned, so we ought to set some management objectives that help ensure that our changing priorities can be met in perpetuity.

If we let public opinion be our guide, it's easy to figure out what most people want from forests. In survey after survey clean air, clean water and abundant fish and wildlife habitat consistently outpoll all other forest values. But is our government managing the public's forests in a way that protects air and water quality or fish and wildlife habitat? Are they protecting biological diversity or soil stability, natural history or archeological sites, recreation areas or just plain old scenery? Not by any stretch of the imagination, not with millions of acres lost to catastrophic wildfire year after year.

No, I think the only thing being protected in the public's forests today is the political influence of environmental groups whose decades-old objective has been to retain power for themselves while disenfranchising other stakeholders. Until voters reassert their power—*and demand that their elected representatives do the same*—our national forests will continue to be held hostage by people who find nothing really wrong with the fact that the public's forests are perishing in deadly wildfires.

The sad fact is that our national forests aren't being managed sustainably, and haven't been for years. I think it's unlikely that any of them could meet the third party certification requirements of any of the world's 80-some certification systems.

Jim Petersen

This massive rockslide in the Bitterroot National Forest is one of several that crashed into Sleeping Child Creek following the 2000 Bitterroot Fire. The slides were triggered by a rainstorm.

Why? Because our government is not managing the large scale ecological risks associated with insect and disease infestations or inevitable wildfire. We have instead acquiesced to the screwball idea that confronting risks in our forests is more risky than doing nothing. I am not aware of any scientific evidence that supports this theory. Nowhere else in our society is such foolishness tolerated, not in crime prevention, national defense or health care.

Risk management is not rocket science. The nation's private forest landowners do it every day. So do many states, counties, municipalities and Indian tribes that own forestland. Clearly defined management objectives are the key. For our nation's industrial timberland owners the primary management objective is to grow trees sustainably and profitably while also obeying local, state and federal environmental laws. But our national forests aren't tree farms, nor should they be, so I think the public might be better served by borrowing from the time-proven practices of non-industrial [small private] forestland owners. Collectively these landowners own more forestland than any other owner class. They also supply more of the nation's wood fiber than any other owner class. Yet their most frequently cited management objective is to create, conserve or protect wildlife habitat. And in fact the greatest diversity in wildlife habitat in the country today is found on non-industrial forestland. How can this be? How can lands that provide such an abundance of wildlife habitat also yield so much wood? The answer is both simple and compelling. Wood fiber is *a by-product* of the constant tree tending work necessary to create, maintain or protect wildlife habitat. The same is true of forests in which landowners wish to retain old trees or improve overall forest quality: thinning and selective removal of diseased or undesired trees is fundamental.

Dozens of government funded scientific studies reaffirm the fact that the West's national forests are in dreadful shape, a direct result of years of neglect, political posturing and pandering to the irreconcilable differences of various special interest groups. There is more than enough blame to go around, so let's just say that our collective failure to agree on a science-based forest management objective *and stick to it* has us in one hell of a mess. On at least 70 million national forest acres we are witnessing ecological collapse on a scale for which scientists can find no precedent in nature. At its core, this isn't a Forest Service or BLM problem. It is a political problem made worse by activist federal judges.

The House of Representatives has done its part to right this wrong. In May it passed the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 on a solidly bipartisan 256-170 vote. Now it is the Senate's turn. Time to again ask why our government isn't doing *anything* on a meaningful scale to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire in western national forests, to ask what our government's forest management objective is. These are, after all, public assets of enormous commercial and intrinsic worth.

Someone once said that a picture is worth 10,000 words. On these pages we present a study in stark contrasts: 21 photographs that speak volumes for what happens when forests are neglected for long periods and, too, what happens when we are guided by well-defined, science based forest management objectives. Decide for yourself which forests you prefer, then call your Senators.

Cover: Lifeless aftermath of the 2001 Moose Fire in Montana's Flathead National Forest. The 70,000-acre conflagration burned up more than 400 million feet of timber in federal and state owned forests. Miles of critical fish habitat were also incinerated. The state quickly salvaged much of what it lost, prompting impressive natural regeneration. (Jim Petersen)

John McColhan

Jim Petersen

John McColhan's haunting photograph of two elk taking refuge in the East Fork of the Bitterroot River, August 6, 2000, near Sula, Montana speaks volumes for the wildfire crisis in western national forests. Contrast this hellish scene with Jim Petersen's photograph of serene Loon Lake, about 50 northwest of Kalispell, Montana on Highway 2. State and private forests surrounding this lake are intensively managed but water quality is protected, as is loon habitat. The camping is primitive but the fishing is great.

Top: 100 percent mortality is predicted in this lodgepole pine beetle infestation on the Nez Perce National Forest near Elk City, Idaho. [Middle] Disease has already claimed this ready-to-burn ponderosa pine thicket near Pine Top, Arizona, not far from last year's dreadful Rodeo-Chediski Fire. **Bottom:** Heavy rains turned this stream into a mud flow following the June 2000 Viveash Fire in New Mexico's Santa Fe National Forest. Common to these photographs: forests that have grown too dense, insects, diseases, wildfire, appeals and litigation. What is our government protecting in these forests?

Jim Petersen

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Top: To reduce overcrowding and promote growth in residual old growth, the Forest Service thinned some trees from this Siskiyou National Forest stand in the early 1980s. **Middle:** Idaho Tree Farmer Dick Bennett is a tireless promoter of selective harvesting techniques that add value to his forests by improving tree quality and promoting natural regeneration. **Bottom:** This spectacular stand of old growth larch near Seeley Lake, Montana is the result of a Forest Service thinning program designed to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Common to these photos: a science-based management objective.

Top: Standing dead fir in the Tahoe National Forest near South Lake Tahoe, California. The risk of wildfire in the Tahoe Basin is very high, yet little has been done to protect communities or watersheds, to say nothing of spectacular recreation. **Middle:** Roasted aftermath of the Pinkham Fire overlooking northwest Montana's Koocanusa Reservoir. **Bottom:** Ponderosa pine thicket in South Dakota's Black Hills National Forest. Although most of these trees are no bigger around than your forearm they are nearly 100 years old. Common to these photographs: insects, disease, wildfire, appeals and litigation.

Jim Petersen

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Top: Tom Wynne's Douglas-fir Tree Farm west of Olympia, Washington provides steady income and abundant fish and wildlife habitat **Middle:** The Salish-Kootenai Tribe manages its western Montana forests for wildlife habitat, water quality and as a source of revenue for several tribal programs. **Bottom:** The northern New Mexico rancher who owns these old growth ponderosa pines removed the thicket that surrounded them to protect the trees from disease and wildfire. No such protection is available to old growth trees in the Southwest's national forests. Countless thousands are dying.

Jim Petersen

Top left: Protecting water quality on Boise Cascade timberland in western Oregon
Bottom left: Restored elk habitat in Idaho's Boise Basin Experimental Forest
Top right: Post thinning: a restored old growth forest west of Flagstaff, Arizona
Middle right: Idaho's Panhandle National Forest: replanted after a 1933 fire
Bottom right: John Ulrich's Tree Farm in Montana's Flathead Valley
Common to all these photographs: well defined forest management objectives

Jim Petersen

Mike McMurray

Jim Petersen

Jim Petersen

Jim Petersen

Sincere thanks to Evergreen Foundation members who renewed their memberships in support of our three healthy forests position papers, published in support of our non-profit mission, which is to help advance science-based forestry and forest policy.