“I started *The Smokey Wire* because I wanted people to hear both sides of Forest Service issues, as honestly and fairly as possible.

A Wide Ranging Interview with Sharon Friedman

Jim Petersen: The non-profit Evergreen Foundation

*Editor’s Note:* Sharon Friedman is the founder and guiding light behind *The Smokey Wire,* an excellent electronic news service that provides summaries and analyses of issues and events impacting the U.S. Forest Service and, more broadly, management of America’s federal forestlands.

She is a PhD geneticist by training but spent much of her long Forest Service career in various aspects of forest planning, including stints as Assistant Director for NEPA in the Forest Service’s Washington DC office and Director of Planning for the Rocky Mountain Region in Lakewood, Colorado– a post that included daily responsibilities for NEPA, planning, FOIA, and the Region’s response to climate change.

For a time, she worked for Rich Stem, a member of the Evergreen Board of Directors, who is widely respected for having cracked the NEPA code as it pertains to post-wildfire timber salvage and forest restoration work. He says she is “one of the best of the best in a very difficult field.”

Friedman is the recipient of a 2022 Distinguished Alumni Award from the Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Sciences. She completed her freshman year at Yale in the early 1970’s, then transferred to the forestry school at the University of California at Berkeley, then returned to Yale where she earned her Master’s Degree in 1977.

Her PhD studies at Yale put her in close contact with three distinguished former faculty members including Tom Ledig, Graeme Berlyn and David Smith, who we knew and who thought very highly of *Evergreen’s* forestry education program. Suffice it to say, Friedman excelled in a scientific realm in which few women work.

“It’s very powerful to know that you will never be like anybody else,” she said in a subsequent Yale interview in which she reflected on her Forest Service years. “Because there were a number of fields in forest science and management – and usually few or no other women – I never felt the pressure to be like anyone else.”

Friedman first started what is now *The Smokey Wire*  while she was working for the Forest Service as “A New Century of Forest Planning.” After she retired and moved to Peyton, small town set in rolling hills and ponderosa pine east of Colorado Springs, Colorado, it had grown and expanded and she renamed it The Smokey Wire. She grew up in Culver City, California, amid legendary movie studios including Metro Goldwyn Mayer – light years removed from the forestry world she has roamed for more than 50 years.

In this interview, she discusses why she started *The Smokey Wire* and what she sees in the Forest Service’s crystal ball.

**Evergreen:** Sharon, we’ve been following your news blog for several years and hold your work in high regard, but we don’t know much about you or why you started your blog.

**Friedman:** I started NCFP simply because I wanted to get both sides of the story of NFMA planning out to particularly college students. There are lots of ideas out there but only a few were talked about.. mostly ideas of law profs, and not practitioners. I don’t think reporting really helps because most of this is too complex for them to understand, and too difficult to summarize in the space available before readers zone out. And many reporters have biases, and that doesn’t help.

**Evergreen:** Welcome to a world we’ve occupied since our founding in 1986. The bias is frustrating and maddening. In fact, the reason I encouraged independent lumbermen in southwest Oregon and northern California to start their own news service was because I knew they’d never get a fair shake from the press. The news service, which I started in ’86 became *Evergreen* magazine. The Internet did not yet exist and cell phones came in bags the size of brief cases. We built our first website in the late 1990s. Rural newspapers in the West now follow us and accept our op-eds. Some even request them, but the big dailies still ignore us.

**Friedman:** I’ve always been a big believer in the importance of telling the federal lands story as honestly and fairly as possible. That involves listening carefully to the disagreeing voices. It means digging into knowledge claims and the information supporting them. It means being equally skeptical of everyone. The format of “news stories” even with comments, mostly unmoderated, is not a way to dig down and get at the truth.. even the truth of why people disagree. I always joke about some Coastal media seeing the Interior West (perhaps except for Aspen, Vail, Park City, and Jackson) as full of incipient Bundys.

**Evergreen:** We found the same to be true, especially during the years we were researching and writing *First, Put Out the Fire!* Urban and big city audiences seem to know only what the NGO’s tell them and its almost always slanted to make it appear that rural westerners are greedy and lack the educational credentials necessary to participate in federal forest policy discussions.

**Friedman:** It’s very depressing.

**Evergreen:** How do we change this mindset?

**Friedman:** We’d don’t have the big bucks the NGOs have, but we do have the Internet. It’s mostly free, so we keep doing what we are doing and hope for the best

**Evergreen:** Same here but Peter Kolb, a PhD forest ecologist from Montana and Evergreen director frequently reminds us that hope is not a strategy.

**Friedman**: I agree it’s not. When you and I are long gone from this plane of existence, people will still disagree about forests and how they should be managed. My role is only to help people understand each other.. as Thomas Sowell said, “there are no solutions only trade-offs.” I hope to help folks understand the trade-offs and why they disagree and see people who disagree as also human beings, not immoral or stupid, or deluded by “misinformation.” I believe in deliberative democracy and that we get better policies from deliberation. But the ends- how things work out- are up to the Big Being Upstairs ultimately. And to people with more power and money that we have in the short term.

**Evergreen:** We’ve always been big believers and supporters of stakeholder collaboration. Many people from very diverse backgrounds are now engaged, the single exception begin anti-forestry groups and the lawyers that represent them in court. We have long believed that the corruption of the Equal Access to Justice Act is the single greatest impediment to federal forest management. Do you agree?

**Friedman:** \_I don’t. I do think that there should be more accountability (when they lose, feds should be able to recover costs, say adjusted based on the net revenues of the NGOs involved). I see that these people, their staffs or their boards, whoever makes decisions, really believe they are right and have the support to litigate. We have greater heads than mine working on this now (called “permitting reform”) due to the need to build in order to decarbonize and we’ll see what innovations come out of it. For me, I’d prefer to try required mediation and arbitration first, with the transcripts open to the public and public comment on the settlement.

**Evergreen**: Our sense is that many Forest Service retirees read *The Smokey Wire.* Who else?

**Friedman** I don’t really keep track but there are folks in environmental organizations, law firms, professors and students. We have readers with mountain bike, OHV and wildlife interests.

**Evergreen:** Your wildlife reference tracks with what we learned during our behind-the-scenes runup to congressional ratification of the 2003 Healthy Forests Restoration Act. We tracked Frank Luntz’s coast to coast polling work and attended a couple of his focus group sessions.

When asked what they thought were the most important forest values, focus participants all picked what I later called “the Big Four:’ clean air, clean water, abundant fish and wildlife habitat and a wealth of year-round outdoor recreation activity.

These qualities all suffer terribly in big wildfires, but they are all present in forests where restoration activity – thinning and stand tending work – pre-dates wildfire. Yet the anti-forestry crowd continues to litigate most Forest Service projects aimed at reducing wildfire risk.

**Friedman:** I don’t think they litigate “most.” I think we just hear about them. Or maybe that’s true in Region 1 but not as much elsewhere. For example, the SERAL 1.0 project in the Sierra Nevada was 55K acres, including salvage, but was not litigated. And I am having a heckuva time getting any real reporters interested. No conflict, no drama, no news.

**Evergreen:** We agree but give us an example of what you’ve heard.

**Friedman:**  I think it’s really important for us older folks to tell our stories, so that our descendants can place the issues of tomorrow in context. I’m not sure history books are accurate. One I read about federal lands policy said that the reason timber industry declined in the Pacific Northwest was due to running out of trees. That’s what college students were learning!

**Evergreen:** I heard a similar story from a Bronx cabdriver many years ago. I was his fare back into Manhattan. We struck up a conversation and he asked me what I did. I told him and an awkward silence followed. Then he asked me if there were any trees left out West. I assured him there were and he told he all he knew was what he read in New York’s dailies. He said he didn’t know if he’d ever travel west but he was relieved to know there were still lots of trees.

**Evergreen:**  Switching gears, many people – including some retirees – do not believe the Forest Service will last more than five or 10 years. What do you think?

**Friedman:** The agency will continue to stumble along because it satisfies the needs of people and bureaucracies often grow, but seldom shrink.

**Evergreen:** You are correct on both counts. The great irony for us is that the increasing pace and scale of our wildfires has become our friend, especially with growing congressional interest in the underlying causes of these fires and what can be done to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire. What would you do with all your knowledge if this was your problem to solve?

**Friedman:** Well, as I said, the Forest Service will stumble along because it satisfies the needs of many people. I don’t think that there is such a thing as an optimal bureaucracy. But as long as there are good people in it, and I see young people out there today who are, we’ll be fine. I’ve worked in an agency that had recently merged, and wouldn’t wish that on anyone, but I do think the agencies could work together better. It seems like because BLM uses USGS as a research arm, and the Forest Service has its own, they do quite a bit of duplication of analyses when it comes to planning. The easiest fix would be to amend FLPMA so that the BLM Director is not a political appointee. In my view, partisan politics actually gets in the way of people finding agreement.

This isn’t true of the Chief of the Forest Service. (technically, Jack was not a political appointee0 Amending FLIPMA is the place to start, and then coalescing and simplifying FS and BLM regulations.

**Evergreen:** And you think this would help?

**Friedman:** It’s a place to start without going through the long and very involved process of creating a Cabinet level agency composed of all natural resource management agencies. The National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and DOD seem to do pretty well on their own.

**Evergreen:** We wish we shared your enthusiasm but we don’t think anything will change in a meaningful way until Congress shuts down serial litigation. As things stand today, one disgruntled citizen can shut down every restoration project the Forest Service proposes.

**Friedman:** Many projects are delayed or withdrawn, but many eventually win court approval

**Evergreen:** Your more orderly approach sounds like something that would get us all started down the road of better understanding the regulatory steps the Forest Service must follow.

**Friedman:** The whole process needs to be more seamless, easier to navigate and more efficient.

**Evergreen:** Our sense is that Good Neighbor Authority and several authorities that have been granted to Native American tribes are helping because they permit states and tribes to help the Forest Service get more forest and rangeland restoration work done on the ground. Do you agree?

**Friedman:** I do. Especially as it concerns the voices of tribal elders and their great respect for traditional knowledge handed down from one tribal generation to the next.

**Evergreen:** We have been doing the plain English translations of Indian Forest Management Assessment Team [IFMAT reports for 40 years and we are on record as believing that the land the federal government stole from tribes more than 100 years ago should be returned to them. It will never happen but Congress is granting tribes the authority to do the thinning work necessary to protect tribal forests from adjacent dead and dying federal forests.

**Evergreen:** What’s next on your TSW reporting agenda?

**Friedman:**  It’s an election year so I’m thinking there will be a great many new programs intended to satisfy one group or another. We’ll try to take a look at these beyond the political hype.

**Evergreen:** We’re trying to understand the role Artificial Intelligence – machine learning – might play in the forestry world. Some of what we’re hearing reminds me of *2001: A Space Odessey,* Arthur Clark’s 1968 sci-fi thriller starring HAL, a computer on board a space capsule bound for deep space that possesses many skills present in computer software today: Speech, facial, eye and fingerprint, recognition and robotic assembly.

Automation has been widely available in forest products manufacturing for more than 30 years. Initial fears about job losses have been replaced by the realization that it has improved efficiency while creating more new jobs making new products than it ever eliminated. We’re seeing the same automated systems attached to timber harvesting systems.

And now we have Light Detection and Ranging [LIDAR] systems that have significantly improved the accuracy of forest survey work. I wonder what AI can add to this. What are your thoughts about AI?

**Friedman:** Just like any other technology, it can make jobs easier or become a problem. I see three challenges with it.

1. Lack of accountability. “we dumped a load of fire-retardant from an unmanned aircraft on your house accidentally but it’s not our fault, the AI did it.” Trust is based on accountability and transparency.. AI often has neither.

2. Lack of understanding. AI can just be lots of information that’s correlated. Old-fashioned folks like us learned “correlation is not causation.” It moves us farther away from talking to real-world practitioners who work directly on specific landscapes.

3. That’s if people are trying to be helpful. People, bless their hearts, have ideas that influence how they will program AI and not all people have the best motives. We may not be able to tell because the research goes “we loaded a lot of info and programmed it and came out with this answer” so you all should do .. what we say. “ Can programmer surmount this kind of conflict of interest? I think we’ve seen with Google Gemini that, maybe, not so much.

**Evergreen:** Thanks Sharon. Interesting as always. We’ll stay tuned to your wonderful mind and hope for the best for all of us.