

Eliminating the Gold Standard for Land Conservation Science: What Are We Thinking¹

Foreword. The House of Representatives has proposed that the gold standard for landscape conservation science be eliminated in 2026. Yes, the entire mission area of Research and Development for the United States Forest Service could be zeroed out. This commitment to scientific inquiry was established from the very beginning of the agency in 1905. Research and Development, one of the most cost-effective federal programs ever, has always been on the ready. Millions of lives have been saved. As a reward, Congress suggests, “let’s eliminate them.” What on earth are we thinking?

My primary reason for writing this short message is to provide support for the 2026 Forest Service, Research and Development budget. Allow me to be very clear. The People’s House of Representatives has proposed eliminating this entire mission area. Let me say unequivocally, this is really a terrible idea. What are we thinking? As respectfully as I can be, perhaps the following three points to the Members might bring light to this proposed action that will have catastrophic consequences if not stopped:

1. **Mission Alignment.** There are some who believe that the Research and Development mission area is not adequately aligned with the Forest Service mission. This is simply not true. Of course, there are some lines of science that are “Futuring” to address problems that we know will be critical to landscape scale conservation, ahead. That’s called being proactive. And, in my years of service, I thought Forest Service Research and Development mission area did a very good job of eliminating work that was no longer relevant. Yes, sometimes we may have extended science activities a bit too long. It’s called progress and being sure.
2. **Connections.** In full transparency, as part of my 50 years of service, I was the Director of both the Northern Research Station (NRS) and the Forest Products Laboratory (FPL). I will try to be clinical. The NRS covered the 20 states of the Northeast and Midwest. When I was there, we had about 154 scientists throughout the country addressing the status, quality and health of air, water, wildfire, wildlife, forests along a very complex urban to rural land gradient. This brings me to a key point that we seem to ignore. The Forest Service has a direct and indirect role on the stewardship of about 80 percent of America’s forests (and forests are more than just trees). This includes 138 million acres of urban forests.

Yes, the agency has an important role in the maintenance of 193 million acres of National Forests and Grasslands. But know, the reach of the Forest Service is unlike any other agency in the world, so when you think about the science reach, for example, consider the 9/11 memorial and the associated Living Memorials; insect control everywhere; helping keeping ash bats in the line-up for Major League Baseball; public land stewardship; estuary care; housing construction; improved utilization of wood, and so on. In other words, almost any connection you can make to people’s lives and their improved conditions, Forest Service Research and Development has been there and touched. You can count on that.

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The proposed budget calls for the elimination of the FPL. What are we thinking? On one hand the Administration wants to clean up the forests so wildfires are not so destructive. That's a good thing. Some of the wood in the forests is not, shall I say, construction material that we are typically used to. It's low value wood. The FPL steps in and takes this "dirty rotten wood" and makes it valuable for a wide range of uses through sciences like wood-based nanotechnology. The next time you go to church, look at the "glue-lam beams." You guessed it; the FPL. So, what do we do to economically get rid of the wood that's clogging up the forests and causing wildfires to burn hotter and longer, we zero out the very science that enables wildfires to not be so destructive. What are we thinking?

3. **Mission Areas.** Some are saying the Forest Service has become a bit stodgy, so let's zero 'em out; let's reorganize them. A previous Administration tried that with one of the Deputy Areas many years ago only to find out that eliminating a significant portion of the indirect role of the agency, caused the States to revolt. Not a good idea when you think of benefit to cost of federal dollars in this indirect role. It's about 20:1. It is true, that I have said before: "the mission area designations may prove to be the demise of the Forest Service." So, if one is concerned about science not being in sync with the Forest Service mission, there are so many ways to easily fix this. I have described them many times. Safe to say, one does not have to zero out the entire mission area to achieve the desired efficiency. What are we thinking?

In summary:

1. Eliminating the best landscape scale science program in the world is just plain foolish, respectfully to many of the Members I know. What are we thinking?
2. Please understand that the Forest Service mission goes far beyond the stewardship of 193 million acres of "National Forests and Grasslands. There is also an indirect role that impacts the lives of so many along a complex rural to urban land gradient. And, Forest Service Research and Development is all over this gradient is such a special way helping make good choices that are lasting.
3. If we are concerned about the impacts of wildfires, don't eliminate the science programs that help reduce the impacts; pretty basic.
4. If we are concerned about mission alignment, there are so many ways to make cost-effective adjustments to ensure mission alignment without eliminating a cornerstone to the overall Forest Service vision; pretty basic.

So, I do not know what the House of Representatives were thinking. Respectfully, do some re-thinking. You are making a huge mistake that will have negative impacts America's lands and the associated goods and services for centuries to come.

Very respectfully,