

A Conservation History of the National Forests



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The existence and use of the National Forests has been debated since before their designation, and as that debate continues today it is worth considering how conservation has fared during the first 100 years of Forest Service management.

Establishing a National Treasure

The very existence of the 192 million acre National Forest system is a significant conservation achievement that should be treasured by all Americans. The notion of preserving forests in public trust to protect watersheds, ensure sustainable use today while maintaining their bounty for future generations is a magnificent conservation idea. The National Forests make the United States unique and the holder of a rapidly disappearing and increasingly valuable commodity – intact forest ecosystems that provide abundant clean water.



Hyalite Canyon, Gallatin National Forest, Montana

Conservation Verses Preservation

When the Forest Reserves were created, a debate ensued about how best to manage them. Two schools of thought dominated, one favoring sustainable logging, grazing and mining, the other emphasizing watershed protection and preservation for future generations. The Organic Act of 1897 settled the matter at the time by allowing logging in the reserves.

Gifford Pinchot, a Department of Agriculture forester, believed in sustainable use and that keeping the forest reserves in public hands was essential to their conservation. Pinchot deserves considerable credit for convincing President Theodore Roosevelt to greatly expand

the National Forest system. President Roosevelt expressed strong support for the forest reserves and appointed Pinchot to be the first Chief of the Forest Service. The agency's mission to coordinate potentially conflicting uses was laid out in a letter to Pinchot by the Secretary of Agriculture. It says that "where conflicting interests must be reconciled the question will always be decided from the standpoint of the greatest good of the greatest number in the long run."

The Rise of Exploitation

The agency's commitment to good stewardship of the land, waters and wildlife has shifted back and forth over the decades. In its first three decades, the Forest Service was for the most part a good steward that limited environmentally harmful activities on the forests to a small scale with the exception of a few extremely large timber sales where entire drainages were logged. However, starting during World War II, the agency facilitated a period of intensive resource extraction that was only slowed in the early nineties due to public protest, congressional action, court rulings, and administrative rule changes.



Old Growth Clearcut, Mt. Hood National Forest, Oregon

During World War II the government ordered the Timber Production War Project to increase National Forest wood outputs. After the war, demand for jobs and timber for housing rose dramatically. Some looked to the National Forests in the West to meet those demands. The Forest Service created and implemented plans to open up the National Forests to development. National Forest sale levels increased from 2 billion board feet in the mid 1940's to over 10 billion board feet by the 1960's.

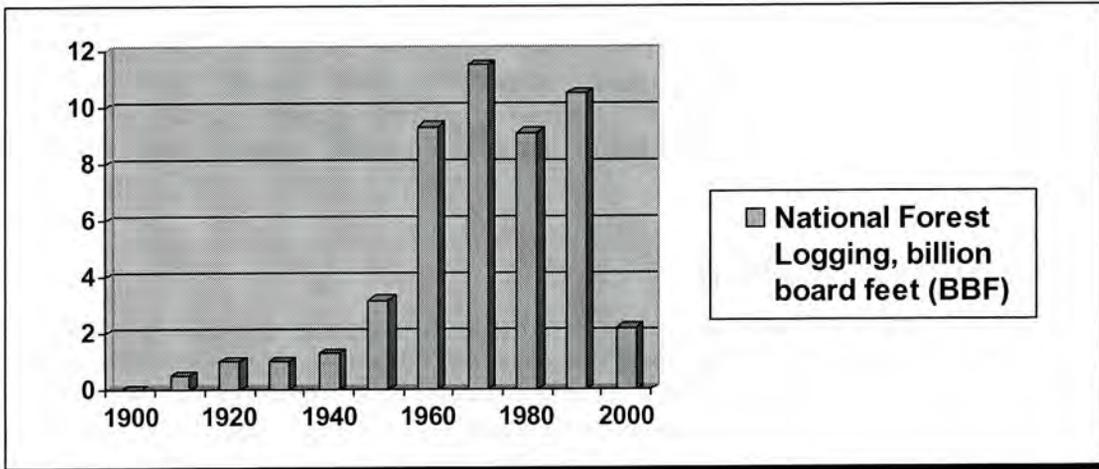


Chart Showing National Forest Logging Levels from 1900 - 2000

Congressional Incentives for Logging

Over the past 100 years, Congress has passed legislation creating powerful financial incentives for the Forest Service to support extractive uses of the forest over conservation. In addition, each year Congress spent heavily on logging, road building and drilling development projects and prodded the agency to increase production to deliver favors to contributors, jobs, and cheap consumer goods for their districts and states.

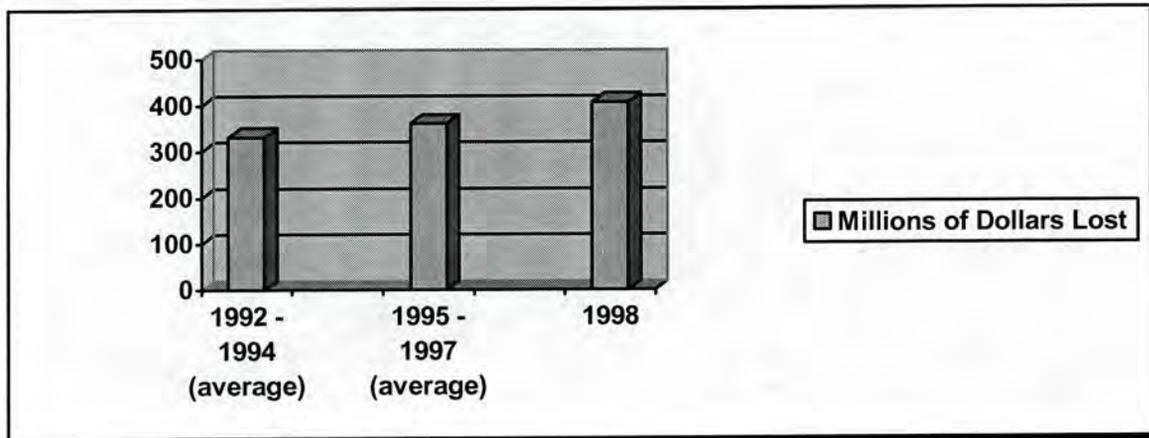


Chart Showing Losses to the Treasury from National Forest Timber Sales (The 1992 – 1997 annual averages are based on analysis by the General Accounting Office. The 1998 figure of \$407 million is based on analysis by Taxpayers for Common Sense using similar methodology.)

Today, 109 of 122 of the National Forests lose money on their timber sales and, in doing so they sacrifice the environment in addition to taxpayer dollars. There also remains a \$10 billion road maintenance backlog that resulted from the agency building too many subsidized logging roads. The result of these financial incentives and this ongoing mismanagement is that the National Forests are exploited and the agency lacks resources in the areas where they are truly needed -- for watershed restoration, fuel reduction and maintenance of recreational facilities.

Preservation Makes a Comeback

While logging and other forms of resource extraction won out in the original debate of the Organic Act and was implemented by the Forest Service, strong pressures for protecting areas of the National Forests continued to surface. Significant areas, including the Grand Canyon and Olympic Peninsula were carved out of the Forest Reserves and designated as National Parks where a hands-off management philosophy prevailed.

The Forest Service also undertook a number of internal efforts to manage primitive areas and began designating areas as wilderness long before the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964. Although this was done in part to prevent the Park Service from gaining more National Forests to manage, the environment benefited nonetheless.



Siskiyou National Forest, Oregon

Citizen challenges to agency management decisions began avalanching during the early 1970's and combined with new environmental laws such as the National Forest Management Act, Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, have prompted substantial management changes in favor of forest preservation.

These efforts culminated in forest plans that provide for greater forest protection and public involvement, designated Wilderness areas covering millions of acres, policies issued by the Reagan administration to protect wildlife and by the Clinton administration to protect roadless forests, reduce logging of old growth in the Pacific Northwest and require that ecological sustainability be the management priority. The level of National Forest timber sales has declined by 80 percent from an average of 10 to 12 billion board feet of logging during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, to around 2 billion board feet today.

Conservation Setbacks and a Return to Exploitation

After progress towards more sustainable forest management and the protection of ecologically sensitive areas under the Clinton administration, the tide has been rapidly shifting back to

reduced protection, intensive logging, and increased energy developments under the Bush administration. Several of the Forest Service's most significant conservation achievements, the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule and the 1982 forest planning regulations species' viability requirements have been undone by the Bush administration and replaced with policies more favorable to development.



Old Growth Clearcut, Willamette National Forest, Oregon

Other landmark conservation plans have been weakened or tossed out completely. Changes to the Northwest Forest Plan allow the Forest Service to ignore logging impacts to old growth dependent species and water quality, opening the door to an increase in old growth logging. The Sierra Nevada Framework was radically altered by the Bush administration to triple logging levels, undermining the ecological and fire-risk reduction goals of the plan, and invalidating an extensive process that was strongly supported by the public and the scientific community.

The Legacy of Exploitation

Impacts on Water Quality and Soils

National Forests provide clean water to thousands of communities and millions of Americans and protecting watersheds is a primary reason the system was created. There is no overall assessment available offering an analysis of the impact on water quality of the past 100 years of management, but a number of facts are available that indicate the Forest Service has not made watershed protection a management priority.

The largest single threat to water quality is the deteriorating system of logging roads that the Forest Service built without adequate resources to maintain. When roads are not maintained they erode, crumble into streams, and choke them with sediment. The agency constructed over 386,000 miles of road, more than 7 times more miles than is contained in the interstate highway system. The current backlog for maintenance and repairs of the road system on National Forests is \$10 billion.

There are currently 21,000 miles of streams in Idaho that do not meet water quality standards, primarily due to past logging and mining on public lands. The Clearwater National Forest in Idaho reports that in 1992, 71% of the streams were in violation of water quality standards due to logging related activities.

Soil erosion is a major cause of diminished water quality, and it also directly affects the future productivity of the forest. The 1961 Canyon Creek multiple use plan on the Gifford Pinchot

National Forest identified timber production as the dominant use of 90 percent of the district, despite that fact that 74 percent of the district rated poor or very poor in terms of soil stability.

Forest Service research has discovered that a watershed that is logged and roaded averages 109 times more soil loss than an undisturbed forest. Despite this evidence which came to light in the early 1970's, intensive clearcutting and road construction on National Forest lands continued unabated for another twenty years.

Impact on Biodiversity from Logging, Grazing and Fire Suppression

The Forest Service has demonstrated an ongoing failure to protect wildlife in its pursuit of multiple use management – in fact, the agency claimed for decades that intensive logging benefited wildlife. There are dozens of species that have been negatively impacted by logging, road building, and grazing including the spotted owl, northern goshawk, coho salmon, grizzly bears, and wolves. Scientific studies confirm that many species need relief from these development activities to thrive.

There continue to be large numbers of agency projects that put fish and wildlife at risk. And there also continue to be a steady stream of Federal court decisions banning logging in old growth forests, roadless areas, and critical habitat for threatened and endangered species, or grazing in riparian zones and critical habitat.

Fire suppression has caused significant ecological changes, particularly to dry forests in the West adapted to frequent low-level fires. Despite growing evidence that immediately putting all forest fires out is unnecessary, the Forest Service still puts out nearly all fires. Wildlife can be negatively impacted by the changing habitat, and by the absence of fire. Many plant species, such as jack, whitebark and lodgepole pines, and snowbrush need fires to thrive.

Key Dates in National Forest Conservation History

1870's-1890's – Forests in the public domain are being logged at an alarming pace. The vast wastelands of stumps and debris left behind by cut-and-run logging operations feed massive fires that kill thousands.

1891 – Congress passes the Creation Act granting the President the authority to establish forest reserves from lands held in the public domain. The legislation is supported by a broad array of interests including preservationists, hunters and anglers, garden clubs, farmers and cities needing watershed protection, as well as foresters concerned about rampant abuse of the public forestlands. Logging is prohibited in the new Forest Reserves.

1897 – The Organic Act "provides that no National Forest may be established except to improve and protect the forest, or to secure favorable conditions of water flows, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber."

1905 – The Forest Transfer Act transfers the Forest Reserves to the Department of Agriculture. Gifford Pinchot is named the first chief of the Forest Service.

1906-07 – Gifford Pinchot prepares bills for Congress placing the National Parks under the Forest Service so that they may be open for resource development. These are successfully opposed in committee. Pinchot's effort ultimately backfires by sparking a preservationists' campaign to establish a permanent separate bureau to administer the National Parks.

1908 – The National Forest Receipts Act of 1908 requires that 25 percent of receipts from the National Forests is paid to the State in which the forest is located for the benefit of schools and roads. While good intentioned, this law creates a powerful incentive for local communities and schools to support increased logging to provide higher payments for their roads and schools.

1910 – Devastating forest fires hit Idaho and Montana and 78 Forest Service firefighters die nationwide. This is a traumatic event for the agency that sets the tone for an aggressive fire control effort in the future.

1911 – In response to extensive logging and the resulting flooding and forest fires, Congress passes the Weeks Act, allowing the establishment of National Forests in the Eastern U.S. The act authorizes the purchase of forests and cut-over lands impacted by excessive logging.

1924 – Aldo Leopold recommends the designation of the 500,000 acre Gila Wilderness in New Mexico, the first time "wilderness" is explicitly named and protected.

1930 – The Knutson-Vandenburg Fund is established to pay for the reforestation and restoration of logged over areas of the National Forests. However, the Forest Service siphons money from the fund to pay for basic overhead costs, creating a powerful incentive for the agency to approve more logging projects to feed their budgets.

1938 – Due to efforts by the Forest Service to remove areas from the Olympic National Monument to log them, the monument is transferred to the Park Service and renamed Olympic National Park.

1950's – Private forest lands become exhausted due to unsustainable logging, particularly of old growth. To pick up the slack in timber supply, logging and roadbuilding in National Forests surge. Logging levels increase from 3 billion board feet in 1950 to 9 billion board feet in 1959.

1955 – The Lolo National Forest in Montana logs 108 million board feet – twice the allowable cut.

1959 – The Northern Region proposes a plan to greatly increase logging levels by converting all accessible National Forests to tree plantations through intensive management.

1959 – Operation Multiple Use, a Forest Service plan, envisions annual logging on the National Forests will increase to 21.1 billion board feet and the construction of 542,000 miles of logging roads by the year 2000.

Early 1960's – Landslides caused by timber roads constructed on poor soils in Idaho's Salmon River watershed destroy salmon runs.

1964 – After years of effort by conservationists, Congress passes the Wilderness Act, protecting 54 wilderness areas totaling 9.1 million acres of National Forest. Today, 34 million acres of National Forest are protected as Wilderness.

1968 – The Gifford Pinchot National Forest logs 559 million board feet from old growth forests even though the allowable cut is only 381 million board feet.

1970 – A coalition of conservationists lobbies Congress to defeat the National Timber Supply Act, which threatens old growth in the National Forests by proposing to convert them into tree farms. The bill intends to make timber cutting the dominant use of National Forests and blocks further designation of Wilderness Areas.

1970 – President Nixon instructs the Forest Service to implement a plan calling for a 50 percent increase of logging on National Forests. The plan is identical to provisions proposed in the defeated National Timber Supply Act.

1970 – The National Environmental Policy Act becomes law requiring environmental impact statements for federal actions that have a significant effect on the environment, and ensures citizen involvement in decision making.

1973 – The Endangered Species Act is approved providing strong protection for species threatened with extinction and their habitat. The law requires the Forest Service to consult with and receive approval from other federal agencies if their actions may affect threatened wildlife and wide-ranging fish species.

1973 – A lawsuit by Sierra Club and other conservationists spur a court ruling that declares clearcutting illegal in National Forests in West Virginia. Another suit by the Izaak Walton League stops clearcutting across most of the National Forests.



George Washington National Forest, Virginia

1976 – The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) is signed into law. The bill limits the size of clearcuts, requires forest plans be developed for each forest, requires the agency to manage the forest in accordance with the forest plan, and for the agency to maintain viable populations of vertebrate species.

1976 – The Forest Service Salvage Fund is created. Salvage timber sale revenues are now deposited in the Salvage Fund to pay for additional projects and now finance approximately one half of the logging on the National Forests. The Interagency Review on the Salvage Program of 1996 finds that the fund creates a harmful incentive for managers to choose logging when other restoration activities that do not return receipts to the agency would be more appropriate.

1979 – The Forest Service completes a second attempt to review roadless areas, called RARE II. Of the 62 million acres inventoried in the study, 15 million are recommended for Wilderness designation, 12 million for further consideration of their wilderness potential, and 36 million for non-Wilderness uses. RARE II is criticized for its incomplete information and its bias toward development. However, this inventory serves as the basis for over twenty Wilderness bills passed during the 1980s.

1982 – The Reagan administration revises forest planning regulations to require the preparation of an environmental impact statement for forest plans and require fish and wildlife habitat to be managed to maintain viable populations of vertebrate species in the planning area.

1983 – A federal court responds to conservationist and Native American concerns and prevents road construction through a proposed Siskiyou Wilderness in southern Oregon.

1984-89 – Congress passes a series of appropriations amendments to require the continued liquidation of old growth forests in the Pacific Northwest, despite growing evidence that old growth dependent species such as the Northern spotted owl and salmon were becoming endangered.

1987 – National Forest logging reaches its high-water mark with 12.7 billion board feet cut.

1990 – The Northern spotted owl is listed as threatened, highlighting the plight of ancient forests and the impact of over-cutting old growth forests in Pacific Northwest.

1991 – U.S. District Judge William Dwyer issues an injunction against all logging in Northern spotted owl habitat. Citing the Forest Service for a “systematic and deliberate failure” to follow laws protecting wildlife, Dwyer’s scathing injunction halts old growth logging in western Washington and Oregon, and Northern California.

1994 – The Northwest Forest Plan is approved by President Clinton to protect threatened species and slow logging in old-growth forests. The plan reduces old growth logging by 80% while funding job creation in impacted communities.

1995 – President Clinton signs the Salvage Logging Rider that suspends environmental laws for logging. Harmful logging projects are offered for sale by the Forest Service including old growth and roadless area sales that previously had been ruled illegal by federal courts.

1996 – Strong public opposition to the Salvage Logging Rider prompts changes in how the Clinton administration implements the law. Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman issues a directive limiting the scope of the rider that halts 224 timber sales, primarily in roadless areas.

1996-2001 – Michael Dombeck, is appointed Chief of the Forest Service and initiates reforms to improve roads management and conserve roadless areas.

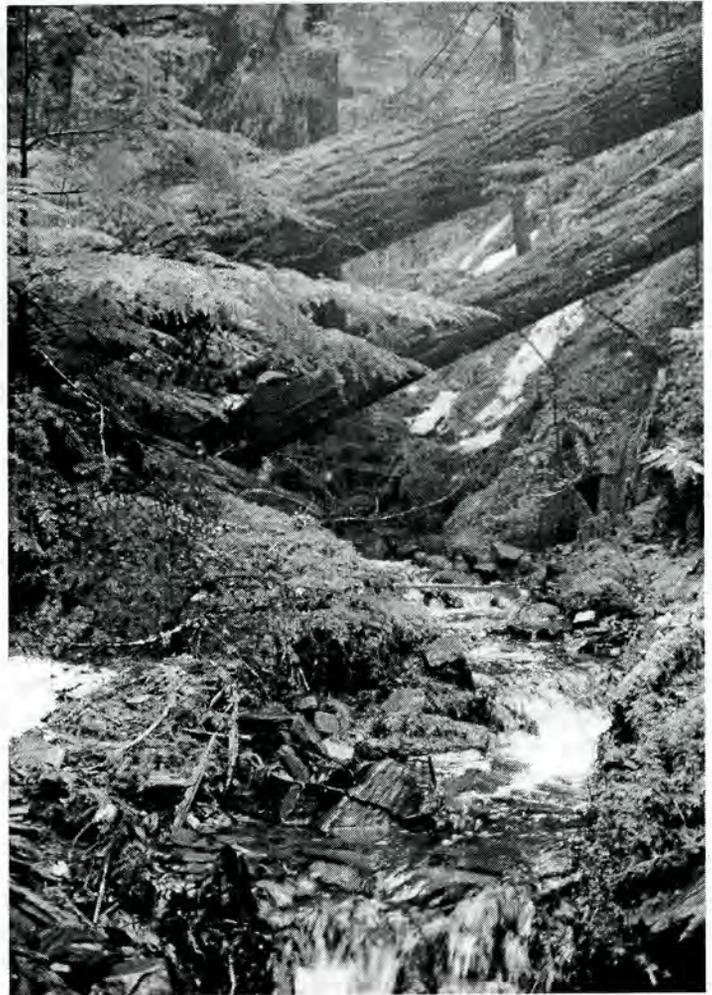
1999 – The Committee of Scientists recommends that maintaining ecological integrity of the forests should be the top management priority.

2001 – President Clinton protects 58.5 million acres of roadless National Forests by signing the Roadless Area Conservation Rule that prohibits most logging and roadbuilding. The public overwhelmingly supports the proposal, submitting 2.5 million comments favoring the policy.

2002-03 – The President announces the Healthy Forests Initiative to reduce environmental protections and public involvement in projects intended to reduce fire risks. The changes limit citizen appeals and allow the agency greater use of categorical exclusions, including logging up to 1,000 acres without an environmental review. Congress passes and the President signs the Healthy Forests Restoration Act that significantly weakens standards and public oversight of restoration and fuel reduction projects on twenty million acres of National Forest.

2003 – The Forest Service removes the Tongass National Forest from the Roadless Area Conservation Rule. The agency is now rapidly moving forward with 50 new roadless area logging projects.

2004 – The Administration revises the Sierra Nevada Framework to allow a tripling of logging levels and changes the Northwest Forest Plan to eliminate wildlife surveys and reduce water quality monitoring to increase allowable logging levels. There are currently over 180 old growth logging projects pending in the region.



Ancient Forest Stream, Willamette National Forest, Oregon

2005 -- The administration approves forest planning regulations that eliminate important protections for wildlife and all other enforceable environmental safeguards in revised forest plans.

2005 -- The Bush administration eliminates the Roadless Area Conservation Rule of 2001 that is overwhelmingly supported by the public. This decision puts 34 million acres of National Forest at immediate risk of logging, mining and drilling.

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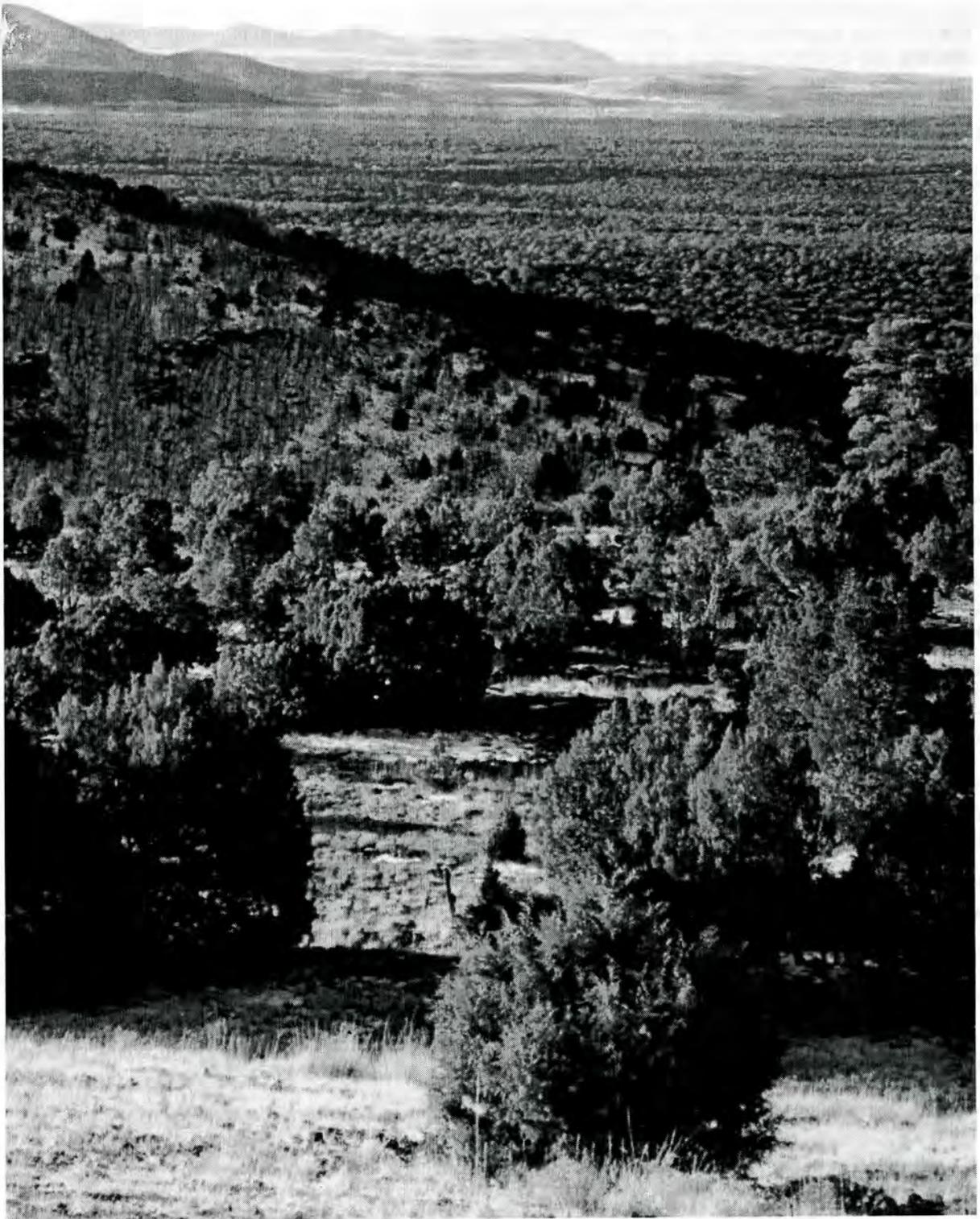
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The Unified Forest Defense Campaign is a coalition of national and regional conservation organizations that includes Defenders of Wildlife, NRDC, The Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, Earthjustice, National Environmental Trust, US PIRG, American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



Coconino National Forest, Arizona