



As a deciduous conifer, the western larch has a contrary nature.

LARCH COMPANY OCCASIONAL PAPER #5

ELIMINATING FOREST SERVICE REGIONAL OFFICES: REPLACING MIDDLE MANAGEMENT WITH MORE ON-THE-GROUND RESTORATION

by Andy Kerr

ABSTRACT

Budget reductions have forced the Forest Service to share rangers and other staff between ranger districts and merge national forests for administrative purposes. Yet, no Forest Service regional office has been eliminated or merged since 1965. Forest Service regional offices should not be merged or preserved, but eliminated entirely. Little conservation good is generated out of regional offices. The private sector has essentially eliminated middle management. Necessary functions now performed by the regional offices could be transferred to the national forest level, Washington Office level or the Albuquerque Service Center. Unnecessary functions currently assigned to the regional offices could be eliminated with cost savings used for other purposes—preferably on-the-ground management at the national forest and ranger district level.



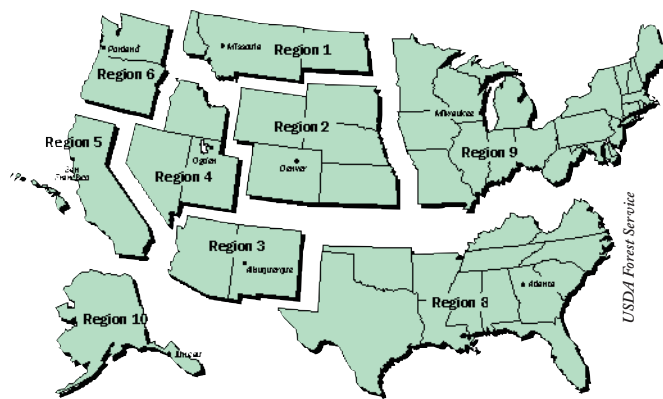
Tom Hooker, USDA Forest Service

Though housed in a very modern building, the Forest Service Region 3 Regional Office in Albuquerque is as practical and relevant today as this 1925 Dodge Brothers “business car.”

The American private sector has drastically downsized or eliminated middle management in recent years. Companies have adopted flatter organizational charts that give more responsibility to lower-level (“on-the-ground,” “field,” or at least closer-to-the-ground) managers. In contrast, the United States Forest Service¹ still maintains a huge middle management bureaucracy housed in nine regional offices sited in large urban areas (see map 1).

Middle management is a layer of management in an organization whose primary job responsibility is to monitor activities of subordinates and to generate reports for upper management. In pre-computer times, middle management would collect information from junior management and reassemble it for senior management. With the advent of inexpensive [personal computers] this function has been taken over by e-business systems. During the 1980s and 1990s thousands of middle managers were made redundant for this reason.²

MAP 1. US FOREST SERVICE REGIONAL OFFICES



Region 7 was absorbed into Regions 8 and 9 in 1965.

Table 1 shows the annual cost of maintaining Forest Service regional offices.

TABLE 1: Annual Cost of Maintaining Regional Offices³

Region Number	Region Name and Headquarters Location	FY 2006 Cost
1	Northern (Missoula, MT)	\$22,456,606
2	Rocky Mountain (Lakewood [Denver], CO)	\$21,263,549
3	Southwestern (Albuquerque, NM)	\$25,345,279
4	Intermountain (Ogden, UT)	\$27,432,683
5	Pacific Southwest (Vallejo [San Francisco], CA)	\$25,753,153
6	Pacific Northwest (Portland, OR)	\$43,581,711
8	Southern (Atlanta, GA)	\$29,727,094
9	Eastern (Milwaukee, WI)	\$9,971,947
10	Alaska (Juneau, AK)	\$18,870,638
TOTAL		\$224,402,660

¹ The concepts presented in this paper also apply to state offices maintained by the Bureau of Land Management.

² Wikipedia (definition), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_management (visited August 29, 2006).

³ Forest Service response to a question for the record by Senator Ron Wyden on February 28, 2007, presented at a hearing of the full Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources on the USDA Forest Service Budget (Wyden Question 22).

The Forest Service has recently set a goal of downsizing the Washington Office and all regional offices by 25% from FY 2006 levels.⁴ While a desirable goal, a better goal would be to eliminate the regional offices entirely. Necessary functions now performed by the regional offices could be transferred to the national forest level, Washington Office or the Albuquerque Service Center. Unnecessary functions currently assigned to the regional offices could be eliminated with cost savings used for other purposes, preferably on-the-ground management at the national forest and ranger district level.

As the Forest Service contends with declining budgets and an increasing need for expensive ecological restoration, the agency has often merged two or more national forests into one for administrative purposes. In other cases, ranger districts have been combined, or at least reorganized to share a line officer (ranger) and staff between two offices. These consolidations continue at the forest and district levels, but the agency has not merged, let alone eliminated, any regional offices.⁵

The National Forest System general operations budget was \$1.381 billion in FY 2005.⁶ Regional offices operate mainly to serve the National Forest System branch of the Forest Service. The budget for the State and Private Forestry branch is minor compared to the National Forest System branch, while the Research branch maintains regional research stations independent of Forest Service regional offices.

\$224.4 million, or 16% of the National Forest System budget was spent on regional offices in FY 2005. It is reasonable to assume that 75% of this work is comprised of the unnecessary mid-level step of data collection, reporting and policy distribution for the Washington Office. In addition, there are other tasks performed by regional offices that could be done as well or better by other offices. For example, Regional Foresters approve national forest plans submitted by individual Forest Supervisors who were responsible for preparing the plans and could just as well approve the documents themselves since they are going to implement them anyway. The remaining 25% of regional work that is important could be redistributed to the Washington Office, Albuquerque Service Center or national forest level of the agency.

The annual budget savings of \$168.3 million could be reallocated to support and increase Forest Service activities on the ground to achieve more and better forest administration, protection and restoration. In comparison, the Forest Service spent \$135 million and \$194 million respectively in FY 2005 for wildlife and fish management and vegetation and watershed management on the National Forest System.⁷

A taxpayer or public policy analyst could ask, “are Forest Service regional offices necessary and/or efficient?” A conservationist could ask, “what good are regional offices for conservation?” I am most familiar with the Pacific Northwest Regional Office (Region 6, Portland) and some of the other regional offices in the West. I know of no conservation benefits provided by the Region 6 office. In fact, the regional office in Portland is the last bureaucratic redoubt of the unreconstructed timber beast (*Sylvanus horribilis*). The Pacific Northwest’s ol’ timber “boys” (almost to a gonad) retreated to the regional office and laid low during the Clinton years. They crawled out from under their desks during the Bush II Administration and the public forests have paid the price.

True and good reform is occurring in the Forest Service at the forest and district levels. Field staff are striving to de-emphasize timber production and emphasizing conservation in national forests by restoring forest ecosystems.

⁴ Bosworth, Dale N. “Forest Service Realignment.” Memo from Chief to Regional Foresters, Station Directors, Area Director, IITF Director, Deputy Chiefs and WO Staff. (File Code 1200). USDA Forest Service, Washington, DC. January 21, 2007.

⁵ Only once has the Forest Service merged a region. Region 7, headquartered in Upper Darby (Philadelphia), Pennsylvania was absorbed by Regions 8 and 9 in 1965.

⁶ USDA Forest Service. 2005. Fiscal Year 2006 President’s Budget. USDA Forest Service. Washington, DC: 1.

⁷ USDA Forest Service. 2005. Fiscal Year 2006 President’s Budget. USDA Forest Service. Washington, DC: B-2.

This evolution has occurred in spite of the Bush I Administration, and flourished during the Clinton years. The Bush II Administration has tried and failed to stem the tide of reform. New thinking has also infiltrated the national offices of the Forest Service, although it has occurred at a slower pace during Bush II's reign.

I never thought I would believe it, but the Forest Service budget is too small. Funding for scientifically based ecological restoration must be increased. Additional funds could come from one or more of three sources. Congress could: (1) appropriate additional funds for the agency's science and restoration programs; (2) reallocate money from other Forest Service programs (such the idiotic fire suppression program⁸); or (3) restructure the agency to eliminate bloated and unnecessary middle management.

"Discretionary" Congressional spending on the Forest Service is not increasing due to wars and tax breaks. Defunding the fire-industrial complex is an important task that must be done, but doing so will take time. Operating the Forest Service in a more business-like manner by eliminating middle management (unnecessary bureaucracy) should appeal to liberals and conservatives alike.

Does getting rid of Forest Service regional offices also mean the elimination of regional foresters? It might or might not. A case can be made to retain regional foresters to coordinate national forests facing similar "regional" issues. However, existing regional boundaries have little to do with geography, ecology or politics. For example, the Northwest Forest Plan (covering an area that is approximately the range of the northern spotted owl) spans parts of two Forest Service regions. In this case, there is a benefit to regional coordination between national forests. These new regional coordinating relationships should be flexible and based on current and emerging ecological and political needs, rather than based on a tradition or arbitrary administrative boundaries.

⁸ Kerr, Andy. 2006. "The Ultimate Firefight: Changing Hearts and Minds." Pages 273-277 in George Wuerthner (ed). *WILDFIRE: A CENTURY OF FAILED FOREST POLICY*. Island Press. Washington, DC.

ABOUT ANDY KERR

Andy Kerr (andykerr@andykerr.net) is Czar of The Larch Company (www.andykerr.net). A professional conservationist for over three decades, he has been involved in the enactment of over 25 pieces of state and federal legislation, scores of lawsuits, dozens of endangered species listing petitions and countless administrative appeals of Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management timber sales and other decisions. He is best known for his three decades with Oregon Wild (formerly Oregon Natural Resources Council), the organization best known for having brought you the northern spotted owl. He has lectured at all of Oregon's leading universities and colleges, as well as at Harvard and Yale. He is a dropout of Oregon State University. Kerr has appeared numerous times on national television news and feature programs and has published numerous articles on environmental matters. Kerr authored *Oregon Desert Guide: 70 Hikes* (The Mountaineers Books, 2000) and *Oregon Wild: Endangered Forest Wilderness* (Timber Press, 2004). He serves as Senior Counselor to Oregon Wild and is an advisor to the Sagebrush Sea Campaign. He also consults for non-profit conservation organizations. Clients have included Campaign for America's Wilderness, The Wilderness Society, Conservation Northwest, Idaho Conservation League, Soda Mountain Wilderness Council, Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center and others. A fifth-generation Oregonian, Kerr was born and raised in Creswell, a recovered timber town in the upper Willamette Valley. He now lives in Ashland, a recovered timber town in the upper Rogue Valley, with one wife, one dog, one cat, one horse, 20 odd tropical fish and no vacancies. In his free time, Kerr likes to canoe, hike, raft, read, and work on projects that move his home and business toward energy self-sufficiency and atmospheric carbon neutrality.



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- #4 *Administrative Appeals are a Misallocation of Conservation Movement Resources*
- #5 *Eliminating Forest Service Regional Offices: Replacing Middle Management with More On-the-Ground Restoration*