



Solving the management “Rubik’s Cube”

TRIBAL FORESTS TODAY

BY DEBRA UTACIA KROL



Forest management across the United States has been described as a Rubik's Cube. It is like a "political and regulatory Gordian knot" that many legislators have struggled with, says Evergreen Foundation

founder Jim Petersen in the introduction to the spring 2014 issue of *Evergreen* magazine. Peterson was referring to the results of a recent study compiled by the Indian Forest Management Team (IFMAT). *IFMAT III* is an independent assessment mandated by the National Indian Forest Resources Management Act. Every 10 years, a group of forest managers and scientists is selected by the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC) to evaluate tribal forestry management and the health of the forests under their care. ITC is a resource group comprising more than 60 tribes and Alaska Native corporations, private and public organizations, and individuals who work together to improve tribal forest operations and forest health.

Tribal elders and foresters alike understand that healthy forests are vital to the well-being of their communities and the planet. Forests provide habitat for animals and birds. Roots delve deep into the ground, keeping soils intact. Healthy forests protect and sustain watersheds, water quality, and water flows. Trees and other plants aspirate, taking in carbon dioxide and emitting life-giving oxygen and water. Forest products, when sustainably harvested and managed, support economies and families. And forest ecosystems contain plants that hold great cultural significance to the people who use them in many different ways.

The Path to Modern Management

Historically, tribes managed their forests as they did their other lands — holistically,

communally, and with a sense of spiritual connection to the earth. Fire played a central role in sustainable forest management, and the “fire mosaic” was integral to maintaining forest health. The land provided all that Native people needed for life and cultural pursuits.

The arrival of Europeans, with their radically different view of land ownership and management, severely impacted the land as well as the people. The introduction of cattle and other non-native plant and animal species, the practice of clear-cutting forests, and, beginning in the early 20th century, fire suppression, all contributed to the decline of healthy forests on public, private, and tribal lands.

Formal tribal forestry programs were initiated around 1910 with the General Indian Timber Act, which gave tribes the right to use their forests for economic purposes, and also gave the Department of the Interior’s Office of Indian Affairs — now the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) — responsibility for managing the forests. Tribes were also coerced to adopt “modern” forest practices such as fire suppression, which the recent history of devastating wildfires has proven to be contrary to sound forest management.

The era of tribal self-determination has ushered in an age of tribal-directed forest management. *IFMAT III* reports that a central element of the “tribal vision” of forest management is “the importance of self-determination and self-governance.” The report also stresses the “primary importance of caring for the forest and managing it in an integrated fashion.” IFMAT experts note that with tribes assuming greater responsibility for managing their own lands, this vision of traditional management has led to many changes in tribal forest operations.

State of the Forests

Today’s tribal forest managers must address a variety of challenges, including “being bombarded with consultation requests,” says Don Motanic, Umatilla, technical specialist for the Intertribal Timber Council. Motanic also notes that grant cycles are spread out throughout the year, and he feels that more coordination between federal agencies could help solve this challenge.

IFMAT III echoes that assessment, stating that, as reported 23 years ago in the first IFMAT report, “Notwithstanding the record of tribes improving management of their



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Fire has proven to be a powerful land-management tool. Controlled burns can improve forest health and reduce the risk of — and damage caused by — large wildfires.



Unrelenting hot, dry conditions in American forests weaken trees and leave them susceptible to fire and assault by tree-killing insects. Collaboration among land managers is crucial for developing strategies to address the issues.

forests, these forests remain underfunded.” The study team notes that tribes continue to suffer from a shortage of forestry professionals versed in planning, developing, and implementing forest and natural resource management programs. Cuts to federal programs and agencies, such as the BIA, result in fewer technical services, such as for geographic information systems, as well as inventory and marketing support available to tribal forest programs. Among the recommendations from the IFMAT are that 800 new positions be created to fill the shortfall in professional tribal forestry management and that annual tribal forestry and wildfire funding be increased 73 percent — a minimum of \$112.7 million — to support forest land stewardship, timber production, and workforce development.

IFMAT reports that tribes continue to be constrained by “conflicting rules and regulations [that] still hinder rather than help tribes achieve self-governance, and tribal forces are increasingly threatened by inaction on the borders of their lands.” Efforts to better manage forests have also suffered from politicization. In the aftermath of the Rodeo-Chediski Fire that burned more than 468,000 acres in Arizona, environmentalists, foresters, and government agencies clashed over how best to clean up the tangle of downed trees, blackened lands, and lost wildlife habitat. The White Mountain Apache Tribe’s forest firm, FATCO, which suffered a nearly fatal blow to its once profitable forest industry after losing 250,000 acres to the fire, has yet to fully recover.

Congress took action in the wake of the Rodeo-Chediski Fire and other devastating wildfires in 2002 and 2003 that damaged trib-



“ The West is in the grip of a severe drought that renders trees less resistant to insect infestation. ”

al lands and resources, including the Cedar Fire that killed 15 and burned through several California tribal communities. The Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004 (TFPA) provides a mechanism by which tribes can initiate projects to reduce threats to their forests from fires, diseases, and insect infestations.

Global climate change is also of concern to tribal forest managers. The West is in the grip of a severe drought that renders trees less resistant to insect infestations, which have devastated more than 70,000 square miles of forests across the U.S. since 2000. Hotter and drier summers, paired with a century-old

buildup of debris due to fire suppression, contribute to greatly increased fire danger.

Invasive species also threaten tribal forests. For example, Sudden Oak Death, a disease caused by *P. ramorum*, a water mold introduced in West Coast forests (some sources say from an Asian ornamental plant), is affecting the cultural, economic, and environmental practices of tribes from Washington to Central California. The Hoopa Valley Tribe in the Trinity Alps of northwestern California is alarmed by the mold’s steady advance toward its reservation, which is populated by a variety of culturally important plants, including the