

# A tale of two processes: The Resource Advisory Committee (USA) and the Regional Forest Agreement (Australia)

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the history of citizen involvement in the management of public forests in the United States and in Australia. It focuses on the processes of two recent (and related) developments: the Regional Forest Agreements (RFA) now in place in parts of some Australian states, forest planning in the USA under the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and the new Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) structure now functioning in the Western United States. RACs are portrayed as one consequence of the general failure of planning under NFMA, and as one possible outcome. Preliminary data on the role and performance of these committees will be presented, and the effectiveness of ongoing citizen involvement in the work of forest management and restoration will be considered. The author's conclusions as a participant in, and student of, these processes are also described.

## 1 THE PUBLIC AND PROFESSIONALS

The forestry profession shares most characteristics of other professions (e.g., law, medicine, history, librarianship), as it has a common body of knowledge, an ethical system, a commitment to accurate and reliable science, a number of professional societies, and a desire to be chiefly self-regulated. Like these other professions, forestry has not been especially welcoming to public scrutiny, let alone sustained public involvement, in its work. In the United States, this has led to demands that "forest management must be given back to trained and experienced foresters" (Maxey 1996) and in Australia has led to the lament of an industry forester on "the end of forestry" as a scientific effort (Underwood 2003).

But professional forestry, at least where the management of public forests is concerned, has some unique characteristics that seem to carry with them a special obligation of involving the owners of those forests in decisions that decide their fate. Public forestry, for example, often makes very large scale and long-lived decisions about the use and appearance of the land. Public forestry also carries with it a high degree of uncertainty and subjectivity, as well as a large amount of decision making wholly dependent on values. A good, contemporary example can be seen in the profession's current, and unresolved debate about just how much "science" exists in the growing field of restoration forestry. Biologist Mark Davis has argued that human values lie at the heart of forest restoration efforts. Many of his critics, while not promoting the notion of value-free forestry, have

been forceful in their assertion that restoration forestry has good science at its very core (Davis 2004 and Winterhalder 2004). For them, values merely underpin good science.

The arguments for a serious public role in the management of public forests are almost classic in nature. They include the ability to bring local knowledge to the management process, the possibility of unexpected and uncommon thinking, the chance to build support and understanding for good decisions, some hope for more equity in decision making, and the ability to give stakeholders genuine ownership of decisions. In recent years, students of the public involvement process have begun to conclude that education, “critical education” in particular, may be the most valuable result of the public involvement process in natural resource decision making (Fitzpatrick 2003). In any case, in both Australia and the United States, the debate about the *necessity* of public participation in the management of state-administered forests has been settled. But the details of the settlement remain less clear. What works best? Is the result worth the time, expense, and delay? Who should be involved, and when? Does an increased public role lead to more sustainable forestry? The next two sections of this paper examine, succinctly, the historic record of public involvement in forestry in Australia, and then, the United States.

## 2 A BRIEF LOOK AT PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN AUSTRALIA

Because of its federal structure, it’s probably fair to say that there are actually *two* possible histories of public involvement in the management of Australia’s forests: one for the Commonwealth, and one for the states which, after all, manage most of the nation’s public forest land. Perhaps because of this dual nature of resource decision making, as well as the necessity for Commonwealth-State interaction, Australia has been rightly termed “the world’s leading laboratory for community-based approaches [to resource decisions] (Dovers 2003). Although there is considerable debate about just how much of this innovation has been applied to forest management, a recent study on just that topic describes, at some length, a long history of efforts at both the state and Commonwealth levels (Buchy and Hoverman 1999).

Opportunities for systematic public involvement in forestry began at about the same time in Australia and in the United States. The U.S. Congress enacted the National Forest Management Act in 1976, and the Commonwealth’s Environmental Impact Analysis system was put in place in 1974. Its earliest applications in forestry dealt with the wood chip industry (Dargavel 1995). In 1979 New South Wales enacted its Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, providing for a specialist court that opened at least a small window to forest litigation.

The years that followed were ones of unprecedented turmoil in the world of Australian forestry. Debates over clearfelling, forest type conversions to pine, wood chip exports, and the proper role of plantation forestry became more common as a citizenry began to look at their public forests in new ways, and for new values. A vast series of commissions and reports were organized to deal with the growing conflict in the forest, a conflict for which the forestry profession was “ill prepared” (Dargavel et al., 2000). This debate also took on a powerful political dimension, which led the Commonwealth government to set up a Resource Assessment Commission in 1989, dealing initially with the timber issue. Some of the Constitutional issues were clarified by the Inter-Governmental Agreement on the Environment of 1992. From this effort came the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) process, which has been described as the “most ambitious, comprehensive and expensive environmental and resource planning exercise ever undertaken in Australia” (Ananda and Herath 2003). This is the process that still guides public forestry in Australia, even though the Resource Assessment Commission is itself now disbanded.

## 3 EVALUATIONS OF THE RFA PROCESS

As part of its social assessment effort, the RFA process was designed to feature a relatively high level of public involvement (Coakes 1998). Process “transparency” was a key goal, and documents were more widely disseminated than in the past. Substantially more effort and money were put into

a wide range of cultural and biological assessments. The public involvement process was often problematical, due both to relatively short planning time frames, and to the large size of the areas involved. An early critique of the RFA process suggested “difficulties due to the ability of some stakeholders to advance their interests more effectively through the political process, to the inherent loss of autonomy by government agencies and to the short times that were allowed ...” (Dargavel 2000).

A sound evaluation of the overall biological and economic results of the RFAs will require substantial research, but efforts to do just that are now underway. However, since 2001, several scholars have examined the process in its own right, and the role of community participation in particular. Hoping to improve community participation in forestry, Marlene Buchy and Digby Race studied three cases of community participation in forest issues, including RFAs. They found the participatory process “constrained” and warned that the several deficiencies that they discovered “could well emerge as the major impediment to reaching enduring RFAs” (Buchy and Race 2001). They also offered some useful guidelines for making participatory forest management more successful.

A Scottish scholar, Bill Slee, closely examined the assessment work done for RFAs in Victoria, focusing more on economic analysis than on the role of the public. While both admiring of the process and professing optimism, Slee noted major flaws in the “estimation of the value of non-market goods,” including recreational and esthetic values (Slee 2001). Slee also conditioned this concern for economics by noting that accurate valuation of all forest resources was directly linked to the size of the associated Forest Industry Structural Adjustment Package. This same concern appeared in forest decision making in the United States, and is a major component of the Resource Advisory Committee process to be discussed below.

The RFA process in Western Australia (WA) produced an especially lively debate, focusing initially on the question of values in the scientific process, and also on the adequacy of data in that state to “judge whether or not the current forest use is sustainable” (Calver, et al., 1998). Participants in RFA development in WA were first questioned in 1998 (Bigler Cole, 1998), with many of the informants unhappy with the “tradeoffs associated with science and management roles in the Western Australian RFA.” A very sophisticated survey of the processes used in WA exists (Hillier 2003). The author argues that the RFA outcome in WA was flawed by the use of a “top-down” and “exclusionary” process, but that the possibility for a more inclusionary, “capacity-building” process now exists in that state.

RFAs were the subject of two studies published in 2003. In the first of them, the authors concluded that the success of public involvement in the RFA process was “questionable,” and subscribed to the notion that it was inadequate in many respects. As a solution, they proposed adoption of a sophisticated and mathematically complex alternative for public involvement called the “analytic hierarchy process” (Ananda and Herath, 2003). The second study is both an overview of the RFA process as well as an effort to review its political performance to date. A very broad critique is provided, but while the authors argue that the RFA process “is flawed and incomplete,” they retain a sense of optimism that a good foundation has been laid (Musselwhite and Herath, 2003).

#### 4 IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE RFA PROCESS

In the years after the initial completion of the Regional Forestry Agreements, one RFA (Tasmania) has completed its fifth year review. Two others have been modified, that for Western Australia in particular. Queensland went its own way, and a fine analysis of some of the tradeoffs that resulted is in process (Norman, et al., 2004). Employment in the forest products industry has remained stable, and by one account, has increased. The RFA process left a legacy of increased knowledge about forest conditions and a much more uniform way of displaying and sharing that knowledge. A substantial increase in the number and size of protected areas set aside from logging is another, and long lasting result of the process.

At the same time, some logging of native forests continues. The debate over the best long term uses of the public forests continues unabated and not much more resolved than before the RFAs came into being. The Commonwealth has kept its promise to help fund restructuring and job training in the forest products industry (e.g., \$37.9 in WA this past May). Although only indirectly related to the RFAs, the slow shift to plantation forestry, both hardwood and softwood, also continues, absorbing a growing portion of the overall investment in forestry. The RFA process can probably be credited for some reduction in the intensity of the overall forest management debate.

But two of the world's leading forest ecologists have recently raised doubts about the long term sustainability of a "solution" that sets up a plantation/set-aside native forest duality. Jerry Franklin and David Lindenmayer warn that it is unlikely that "partitioning the forest estate into plantations (fibre farms) and reserves will achieve all conservation objectives and resolve remaining conflicts between ecological and commodity goals" (Lindenmayer and Franklin 2003). As the next part of this paper will explain, the Forest Plans established on National Forests in the United States were analogous in many ways to the RFAs, but led to quite different results.

## 5 THE PUBLIC ROLE IN U.S. FORESTS BEFORE THE NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT (NFMA) OF 1976

The National Forests of the United States cover about 80 million hectares, of which 60 million are forested to one degree or another. These lands are managed by 155 National Forests. About 15% of the National Forests has been set aside by Congress as Wilderness, and is kept free from logging, road building, and the use of motorized vehicles. Another 15% of the National Forest land base remains roadless and undeveloped. The size of the Wilderness system and the presence of a large, undeveloped land base also speaks to the tree growing productivity of the National Forests. National Forest lands are 30-40% less productive than forests owned by private timber firms, and are also less productive than the forests owned by the various states. The United States currently has about as much forest cover as it did in 1900, and the amount of National Forest land has been slowly growing through purchase and donation.

The United States Forest Service, a branch of the Agriculture Department, manages these lands with approximately 20,000 employees, located in almost every state. It's a highly respected agency with a well-trained work force. Its professionalism stems chiefly from the reaction to corporate excess during the Progressive Era of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The early foresters of the Forest Service were trained both in Europe and at some of America's most prestigious universities. They brought to land management the concept of a trained and economically disinterested corps of professionals routinely doing good work for the long term public benefit. Since forest management until about 1946 was chiefly custodial in nature, the concept of a professional trusted to do good work found little cause to be challenged. But in the pay-back times that followed the return of soldiers from WW II, the Forest Service shifted quickly into a long period of road building and tree cutting, which became the dominant uses of the National Forests.

Forest planning before 1976 was on a piecemeal basis, and forest plans were prepared solely by Forest Service employees. When specialists in recreation, wildlife, or cultural resources were available to help write these plans, resources other than timber were given some consideration. Where internal specialists weren't available, these plans became road building and timber management plans. The public played no regular or systematic role in the development of these plans and had no easy way to challenge them. Although the Forest Service gave lip service to transforming these plans into so-called "multiple use plans" (after a statute of the same name), they remained mostly single use plans, committed to facilitating logging. Congress, through its appropriation process, did its part by offering high funding levels for road construction and insuring that the career path to success in the Forest Service lay through cutting trees.

But times were changing, even if the Forest Service wasn't. By the 1970s, there was growing public concern over how the forests were being managed, the courts were becoming more active in the field of forest litigation, and there was a heightened recognition of the complexity of managing

forests for genuine multiple-use goals. The leading historian of the Forest Service, writing on the eve of passage of a major revision in forestry laws, concluded that “all these pieces need merging into an administrative whole” (Steen 1976).

## 6 THE NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT OF 1976 (NFMA)

In 1976 Congress passed Public Law 94-588, the National Forest Management Act, the same law, slightly modified in the interim, that governs the management of U.S. National Forests today. As was the case with the earlier Sustained Yield-Multiple Use Act, this new law was opposed by the timber industry and was not especially welcomed by the Forest Service. Professional associations in the field of forestry, as well as hunting, fishing, and conservation groups generally supported the new law. NFMA set high standards and high expectations, but does not apply to forests of states.

The new law insisted on a serious degree of public participation in the writing of plans for the 155 National Forests, although the actual authors were still to be the professionals of the Forest Service. This time, though, multidisciplinary teams were to do the writing of what were to be integrated plans dealing with all forest uses. The plans were to reflect and maintain forest diversity, to protect soil and water by identifying places unsuited to commercial use, and to stress the use of temporary roads. As was the case with RFAs, temporary citizen advisory boards were permitted during the time of plan development. The new plans could recommend set-asides as Wilderness and natural areas (but not “parks,” a concept which, in the United States, carries the notion of not allowing hunting). Even-aged management was to be severely limited, as was clearfelling (clear-cutting in USFS parlance). The regulations that followed, which have been modified several times since 1976, put in place an ingenious test for “suitability” for logging: those places in a forest can be defined as suitable if the goals of the Forest Plan demand that they be defined as suitable. In other words, there was no standard for suitability.

The 155 Forest Plans that were eventually published were mostly developed in the traditional manner: an interdisciplinary team of USFS employees wrote the Plan, completing whatever new fact-finding was needed during the same time period. These plans, often several hundred pages in length, were revealed to the public during a 90 day comment period. In most cases, some minor revisions were made in response to the public, and a final plan published, remarkably similar in nature to the draft plan.

A few National Forests encouraged the public to develop alternatives to the version prepared internally, and two National Forests, both in the West, adopted major parts of these public alternatives. One Forest, the Nez Perce, in central Idaho, assembled a stakeholder panel (in which the author of this paper participated) that essentially wrote the final Forest Plan (in 1987).

The process used to write these new Forest Plans was probably quite close to that envisioned by Congress. It was not at all close to the process which a citizenry newly, and more deeply interested in their forests, had imagined. Nor, as it turned out, were the courts to prove to be very friendly to these new Forest Plans.

In combination, the Forest Plans also contained a spirit of bureaucratic optimism that history has shown to have been wildly unwarranted. Taken together, the Plans assumed that a grateful nation would see to it that Forest Service employment increased by at least 50%. The budget for new logging roads would double, and within a decade virtually every last stand of timber would be brought under “management.” Timber harvest levels would double and perhaps even triple under this scenario, new campgrounds and trails would be built, and hunting and fishing on the National Forests would flourish. Despite the new roads, water quality would begin to trend upward, and room could be found for at least a tiny increase in Wilderness Area set-asides, although none of those places would contain very many trees. These plans were to be all things to all people.

## 7 IN THE AFTERMATH OF NFMA

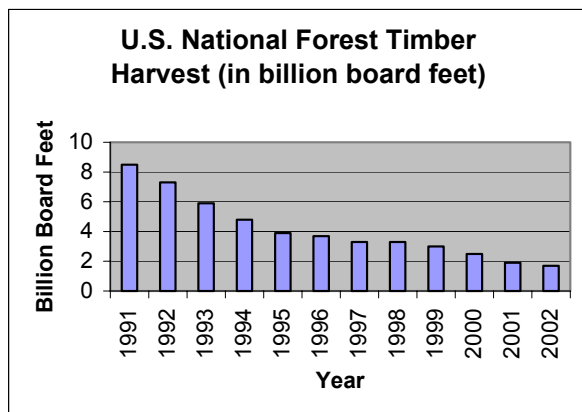
The years that followed the completion of the new Forest Plans proved to be a golden age for forest litigation, and the ongoing budget crises in the federal government led to years of flat budgets for the Forest Service. Virtually every Forest Plan was litigated, and only a handful survived intact. Most were modified by the courts or by subsequent compromises. In some crippled form they are in use today, although a new cycle of revision is well underway.

The budget for logging road construction, which was the very key to most other commodity-related Forest Plan expectations, never came close to what had been anticipated. Even Presidential Administrations sympathetic to the timber industry (Reagan, Bush) rarely proposed Forest Service funding at even a fraction of Plan expectations. Overall budgets for the Forest Service also began to shift away from commodity production (Farnham 1995). A major study of citizen involvement in forest management revealed a high level of anger and frustration with the Forest Service's work in planning, and a subsequent lack of support for planned outcomes (Lyden et al. 1990).

There is also a large body of evidence to suggest that something bigger was at work within the Forest Service itself—a major paradigm shift in employee attitudes. Surveys of Forest Service employees published in 1992 and 2000 revealed growing concern by agency employees for water and soil issues, for sustainability, and for the protection of biological diversity—all at the expense of tree cutting (Brown and Harris, 1992 and 2000). A review of the literature on this paradigm shift published in 1995 was six pages long (Mohai 1995). The Brown and Harris study of 2000 also revealed a minor shift back toward commodities, but only because most of those surveyed felt that the agency itself now genuinely cared for, and promoted, non-commodity forest resources.

Probably all of the factors listed above contributed to changes in the single most important and traditional indicator of Forest Service “success,” the quantity of trees cut each year. In this case, I am offering the definition of “success” provided by the politicians representing those states (most in the West) that are highly dependent on timber harvest employment. It is no coincidence that these same members of Congress tend to control the various committees of Congress that deal with forestry and natural resource issues. By their standards, the numbers in the following table represent a failure and a disaster on a grand scale:

Table 1. The collapse of the U.S. Forest Service timber harvest program. U.S.F.S. Annual Report. (1 bd. ft=2.36 m<sup>3</sup>).



The fast and steep decline in timber harvest on the National Forests had the biggest impact in rural areas of the western United States. While logging and milling jobs were lost, the drop in harvest levels was also seen by many as a breaking of an old, unwritten, but still vital social contract. Beginning in 1908, the Forest Service began to pay counties (shires) 25% of the revenue collected by the agency. Optimists always hoped that this number would represent 25% of *net* revenues, but since Forest Service operations never did turn a profit, the payments shifted to *gross* revenues. This money was used by counties to operate local schools and also pay for road building and repair work. Since many forested counties lacked much taxable private land, these payments from the use of public lands came to play a crucial role in the survival of many small towns. A key component in the stability of the so-called 25% Fund was a high and sustained level of tree cutting on Forest Service land (Parry, Vaux, and Dennis, 1983).

An equally important part of this social contract dates from the earliest years of the Forest Service. The agency's employees tended to be bright, well-educated, to have a perspective on land management not controlled by parochial interests, and to have a great service ethic. When a school or library board needed a member, the men (and *much* later, women) of the Forest Service stepped in to help. When a flood or disaster came, the Forest Service crew was there. When indifferent politicians failed to provide what rural areas needed, the Forest Service was fast to organize an educational tour. Over time, the Forest Service came to be seen as the provider of jobs, stability, and leadership. There is still a great debate about what timber town "stability" means, whether stability in resource-dependent areas is even possible, and whether or not living in a "stable" town or county is even a good idea, with much of the best research having been done in Idaho (Machlis, Force, and Balice 1990, and Machlis and Force, 1998). But little of that scholarly debate reached local school boards and country commissions in the rural towns of the American West. In those places, the contract was both real and vital to survival, and by 1998 it had been broken. The management and goals of the local National Forests were seen in timber country as becoming increasingly unreliable, no longer trustworthy, as insensitive to the financial needs of schools, and maybe worst of all, unpredictable. Leadership and professionalism remained on offer, but not many trees.

By the end of 1998, the old social contract had become so frayed that a special study was commissioned on ways to rebuild the relationship between the Forest Service and timber dependent communities, albeit without returning to the timber harvest levels of the 1960s and 1970s. The authors of this study developed a ten page list of ways various forest managers could improve relations with communities, a necessity, since a survey conducted with the same study found that 65% of respondents had noticed increased conflicts with the Forest Service in timber towns (Frentz et al., 2000).

The portion of the U.S. population described by the Census Bureau as living in "rural" areas is less than 20%, and has been declining since the year 1900. A good part of that rural population lives in the 800 counties that are located in, or adjacent to, National Forests. For many reasons, including long delays in redrawing electoral district boundaries, these rural counties enjoy more political influence than their numbers would warrant. They also seem to attract a bigger sympathy vote in Congress than, for example, depressed urban areas. In any case, plunges of up to 90% in traditional Forest Service payments to county school and road budgets attracted both attention and concern in Congress.

The leading political advocate for rural counties, the National Association of Counties, argued for a continued link between tree cutting and county 25% fund payments, and this body strongly opposed (and still opposes today) any form of "decoupling." Even so, realists in Congress and in the county leadership came to agree that several years (ending in 2006) of budget repair would be needed to enable timber regions to recover from the collapsed harvest (and payment) levels. Until 2006, counties could choose to have 25% fund payments made based on historical averages rather than on recent numbers. About 80% of the counties made that choice.

Conservation groups were the other main players in this fight (Congressional Quarterly, 2002). These groups argued for decoupling payments from logging, but like virtually everyone in

Congress itself, remained supportive of the general notion of the social contract between the Forest Service and timber communities. Working with sympathetic members of Congress, conservation groups forced a major change in the legislation: the addition of the Resource Advisory Committees.

Public Law 106-393 (October 2000) is called the "Secure Rural School and Community Self-Determination Act." It allows timber dependent regions to select, until 2006, a high level of 25% fund payments based on historical averages. It also directs the Secretary of Agriculture to establish what in the end proved to be 56 Resource Advisory Committees. A large amount of money was also appropriated to fund the new law: about US\$450,000,000 per year for schools and roads, and, in what might be termed brand new money, about US\$37,000,000 per year for the RACs.

## 9 LEARNING FROM THE AMERICAN RACS

Even though they helped write the new law, many conservation groups have not traditionally been eager to participate in collaborative efforts such as those of the RACs (Hibbard and Madsen, 2003). This is chiefly because industrial groups and their political allies have often dominated and controlled many such efforts. P.L. 106-393 quite cleverly eliminated that problem by requiring establishing RAC membership by "category" (i.e., industrial, political, and conservation). A majority of the five members appointed from each category must vote to approve expenditures, and all three categories must also approve, thus offering a possible double veto of the most egregious proposals. As a further limit, the statute stipulates that 50% of all RAC project expenditures must go to watershed restoration projects of varying kinds. The rest of the money can be spent on soil productivity improvement, improvements in forest health, fish habitat restoration, weed control, and the reestablishment of native species in the forests. As a result of these voting and budgetary restraints, the work of most of the RACs has proven to be non-controversial, labor intensive, aimed broadly at forest "restoration" (recognizing the ambiguity of that term), and amazingly popular and well-received within the Forest Service and within local communities. RAC overhead expenses have also been kept very low, with over 95% of annual budgets actually reaching the field.

The author of this paper is a conservation group member of the North Central Idaho RAC, which covers about 2 million hectares of public forest. The author's experience has led him to conclude that RACs do not:

- represent a form of devolution or transfer of power to rural areas,
- void any current environmental protection or procedural law,
- replace USFS professional decision making, and
- preempt normal USFS planning methods.

However, they do:

- have plenty of money to spend,
- represent a workable form of collaborative decision making,
- have a strong commitment to job creation,
- play a major role in forest restoration and in fire restoration,
- work closely with American Indians,
- represent a type of adaptive management (most RACs continually review their work),
- have lots of political influence, and in fact, will be the key force if the law is renewed in 2006.

In May 2004, delegates from RACs located in most of the western states met in Reno, Nevada, to hear the initial results of a survey of RAC member opinions, and also to learn about some of the more innovative RAC projects. The project data is anecdotal, and the preliminary survey data (N=170) was compiled by Boise State University, in Idaho.

RACs have funded many projects designed to restore fire to more natural conditions, including many non-commercial thinning projects. A large amount of money has been spent on efforts to control invasive, non-native species of plants, especially in the interface zones where public and private lands meet. Several projects designed to eliminate unneeded roads have been approved, and



a wide range of projects located in-stream have been funded. In California, a RAC approved funding to build a high school greenhouse that will grow only unusual native plants for use in both public and private projects. An especially interesting fire ecology project in the Sierra Nevada Mountains is designed to restore natural fire cycles, but in a way that will replicate American Indian fire management methods—and to produce plants that traditionally were used by American Indians. Other projects have trained citizens to monitor and evaluate forest management activities. While many of these projects clearly have long term commercial value, many are designed to enhance forest values that are seldom considered or are under valued when costs and benefits are calculated. Almost all RAC projects have been deliberately labor-intensive, and have emphasized the use of local labor sources. A large number have been aimed at youth involvement and training.

Over 90% of the RAC members surveyed by May 2004 were highly satisfied with RAC performance to date, and just under 90% felt that that PL 106-393 should be renewed when it expires in 2006. A similar number of RAC members were convinced that the work of the RACs, rather than the impact of the new system of country payments, would prove to be the key to convincing Congress to reauthorize the law. A majority of respondents reported serious improvement in their relationships with forest managers, and also with other stakeholder participants. County government respondents were strongly supportive of transferring added money (some of their discretionary funds) to RACs. The survey data seems to reveal a popular government program on its way to success, or at least the perception of success.

## 10 LOOKING BACK AND AHEAD IN TWO COUNTRIES

An examination of the forest plans and agreements produced under NFMA and RFAs reveals a large number of similarities in process:

- Best available science must be used and the creation of new data is allowed if needed.
- Plans are to be in effect for a long duration.
- Plans call for periodic review and revision.
- More public involvement than in the past, with the creation of *ad hoc* stakeholder groups allowed.
- No on-going public involvement in broad planning issues.
- Set asides of varying types to be recommended.
- Large areas are covered by the plans and agreements.
- Forest professionals author the plans.

The result of these plans, beyond just the process used, reveals yet another set of similarities:

- All or part of many plans and agreements have been modified since completion.
- Not much public unanimity has emerged on how public forests can be best managed.
- The debate over the fate of native forests and old growth continues.
- There is no agreement on the adequacy (in size and management) of set-asides.

In both countries, the dilemma (some call it the “paradox”) remains over how to mix citizen needs and citizen involvement into a process that also demands the very best science (Walker and Daniels, 2001). Many students of public land management see collaboration as a way to resolve that paradox.

The jump to this next logical step in managing public forests, to a more collaborative process, has been taken faster in the United States than in Australia. This is probably due to the precipitous drop in the level of tree cutting on National Forests and the scale of the impact on rural areas, as well as to the relative ease of forest litigation. Daniel Kemmis, the former mayor of Missoula, Montana, has also played a big part in the debate over collaboration. He is a writer and public speaker, and a prolific and well-regarded student of the long debates about the fate of public lands. Kemmis has argued that virtually all public land decisions, even those using the very best science,

that don't actively involve the public in collaborative ways, are destined to fail (Kemmis, 2002). His thoughts have not fallen on deaf ears.

Some scholarly evidence of the efficacy of collaborative management exists. Nelson Lafon and others have examined the use of this method in important wildlife decisions (Lafon et al., 2004). An insightful look at the process, when used in forest planning, has just appeared, dealing with British Columbia (Mascarenhas and Scarce, 2004). Collaborative management, when shown to increase overall stakeholder learning skills, was shown to be effective in managing a wildlife refuge located in Lake Ontario (Schusler et al. 2003). In fact, there have been so many efforts made at collaborative management in North America that a recent review of the literature is fifteen pages in length (Conley and Moote, 2003). Early in 2004, R. John Petheram and others, in an article reviewing the general efficacy of collaborative forest management, suggested that while this method was "vastly different to the usual concepts held by most Australian resource managers about 'community development,'" it would nonetheless be a useful tool to use in Australia (Petheram et al. 2004). These authors examined, briefly, the use of collaborative management in the Wombat State Forest, citing it as worth further study, a point of view not wholly shared by others (Nelson 2002). Collaborative management at Wombat has also been more recently (and favorably) reviewed (Anderson 2003).

At the small world of the North Central Idaho RAC, the author has noticed some changes that seem to be genuine improvements. Forest Service employees seem more attentive and accommodating than in the past. Members of the RAC have adopted a more moderate and compromising tone, and have displayed an amazing energy to learn more about forest management and complexities. Projects that appear likely to have an extreme impact on the land are being avoided. The importance of water quality is now broadly accepted. Job creation is viewed as important, but within the constraints of sustainable management practices. New friendships within the RAC membership have been created.

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