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Lyons - Background on Forest Service Report March 15, 1993

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March 15, 1993

MEMORANDUM

TO: MARLA ROMASH

FROM: JIM LYONS

SUBJ: BACKGROUND ON FOREST SERVICE REPORT

The SAT -- Scientific Analysis Team -- report was prepared by Forest Service scientists to aid in development of a new Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to comply with an order by Judge Dwyer in the Pacific NW. That order placed an injunction on Forest Service timber sales likely to impact on spotted owl habitat. The Judge indicated directed the Forest Service to address 3 questions in preparing a new EIS before he would consider lifting the injunctions.

As background, you need to understand that the Forest Service (in USDA) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM in the Dept. of the Interior) manage federal forest lands in the region. These lands contain most remaining old-growth timber. The spotted owl -- which as listed by the Fish and Wildlife Service as a threatened species -- inhabits old-growth forests. It is not the only species associated with old growth, however. The marbled murrelet -- a coastal songbird -- and several species of salmon, are also affected by how old-growth forests are managed.

The Dwyer lawsuit has tied up Forest Service timber sales in the region. The suit alleges that the Forest Service has failed to comply with requirements of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), not the Endangered Species Act. Part of the Forest Service's problem in attempting to resolve this issue, however, has been failure to reach agreement with the BLM on how to manage federal lands. BLM has decided to do their own thing.

SAT Report

The SAT report responded to the 3 Dwyer questions:

1. Did the 13 BLM timber sales exempted under the ESA (God Squad procedure) affect the Forest Service's management strategy?

2. Did new information about the "viability" -- i.e., population trends of the owl -- affect earlier studies done by the Forest Service?
3. How would the Forest Service strategy for managing old-growth forests affect 32 other species (other than the owl) identified by the plaintiffs in the lawsuit?

The answer to the first question was no. During the Bush Administration, the BLM requested an exemption from the ESA for 26 timber sales. They got an exemption for 13. Judge Dwyer wanted to know what impact these sales would have on the Forest Service's plans to protect the northern spotted owl.

The answer to the second question was no as well. The Judge was concerned that "new" information on owl populations indicated that the population was declining faster than originally thought. This is not the case according to the scientists.

In answering the final question, the scientists evaluated, to the best of their ability, all the old-growth associated species of plants and animals that they were aware of. They found that 1100 species were in this category. Their analysis indicated that a large number of these species were taken care of by existing or proposed management strategies. However, for some small number, it is unclear how current management strategies might affect them. Part of this analysis looked at fish populations as well, and changes in management were considered to better protect sensitive fish species.

Political Concerns

All this seems rather innocuous. However, this study is one in a number that leads to the conclusion that current management -- and timber cutting policies -- are harming the ecosystem's viability and the survivability of associated plant and animal species.

The problem is that the science simply makes the outcome look worse for loggers, the industry, and affected communities.

Jack Ward Thomas, the leader of the SAT team, and the leading Forest Service scientist on this issue, has been subject to death threats and is an outcast in his own community as a result. I fear that labor,

industry, and community response to the report will be visceral and ugly. Many still harbor hope that harvest levels can be sustained -- or at least will not drop precipitously. The SAT report squashes most if not all remaining hope for such an outcome. I fear that the Summit might become a public lynching of Thomas and a modern day "witch hunt" of the scientists involved in these studies. Most of all, I fear that the President and Vice-President be put in the position of debating the technical issues of the science of the subject and be forced to publicly disown what is a good, scientific assessment of the situation in the region.

FYI, I will bring you a copy of a summary of the history of the issue and a chronology of key dates to give you an historical perspective on these issues.

Let me know if I can be of further assistance.