

# Collaboration: A Work in Progress

BY DUANE VAAGEN

*Editor's note: This article was originally published in 193 Million Acres: Toward a Healthier and More Resilient US Forest Service, a book published by SAF in 2018. The book, edited by Forestry Source editor Steve Wilent, is available in the SAF Store, [www.eforester.org/store](http://www.eforester.org/store).*

I suppose it is only fair that a lumberman's voice should be among the many that fill the pages of this fascinating book. Still, I was pleasantly surprised when Society of American Foresters editor, Steve Wilent, asked me to submit an essay.

I am not an SAF member, but helping the US Forest Service find innovative ways to restore natural resiliency in western national forests is vital to the future of our third generation, family-owned company—Vaagen Brothers Lumber Company, Colville, Washington—and to the futures of the rural communities of northeast Washington.

Over the last 15 years or 20 years, I have probably devoted more time to

helping build up forest stakeholder collaborative capacity than any other lumberman in the nation. I did it because nothing else was working, and nothing else has done more to ease the log shortage our family has endured for 15 years.

Many of my sawmilling colleagues think I'm wasting my time, but I don't. The old New England Town Hall meeting format—the backbone of our democracy—still works. In fact, its appeal is growing among forestry's advocates for one very significant reason: the process—what we call collaboration—reduces the risk of litigation by increasing citizen-stakeholder participation in the management of our publicly-owned national forests.

Our company's strong support for collaboratives that represent the broadest possible cross-sections of values found in northeast Washington communities honors commitments made by my father and his brother when they founded Vaagen Brothers in 1952. We are deeply rooted in at least a dozen rural timber and farming communities in Stevens, Pend Oreille, and Ferry counties. We employ about 225 workers in two mills in northeast

Washington. Our main mill is at Colville in Stevens County. We also operate a HewSaw single-pass milling machine at Usk in Pend Oreille County. For years, we owned mills at Republic in Ferry County, and Ione in Pend Oreille County, but lingering uncertainty with federal log supplies forced us to close the mills several years ago.

Many of our employees have been with us for more than 30 years. We have seen one another through many ups and downs, both economic and personal. That's what families do for one another. From experience, I can tell you that replacing a mill that burns down is easy compared to the challenges that go with hiring and training a top-quality work force, so we work hard to retain our employees.

The 1.1 million-acre Colville National Forest is the geographic and economic backbone of northeast Washington's rural communities, and a major source of logs for our mill. But its value to us extends far beyond that of its standing timber. It is our primary source of drinking water and our year-round outdoor playground. We hunt, fish, hike, camp, ski, snowshoe, snowmobile, and ride horseback through its rugged beauty.

Our Northeast Washington Forest Coalition, which includes collaborative stakeholders who advocate for more Wilderness as well as those who advocate for more active forest management, believes that between 500,000 and 600,000 acres of the Colville is well-suited to a mix of forest management objectives, including timber production and the restoration of natural resiliency in stands that hold too many trees for the carrying capacity of the land.

Given our mix of shade tolerant and intolerant conifer species, and other considerations, including soil quality, elevation, aspect, slope, and rainfall, the Colville lends itself to perpetual thinning on a 50-year rotation, meaning that in Year 51, we'll be back thinning the same forest we thinned 50 years ago. Our mills at Colville and Usk are designed to process the types of small diameter trees that these perpetual thinnings will yield. Logs with four-inch tops are routine for us. What we cannot mill as lumber, we sell in chip

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A collection of essays that examine the challenges the US Forest Service faces and propose solutions that would address them. Contributors include numerous retired agency leaders, including two former chiefs, as well as longtime outside observers. The purpose of the book is not to criticize the agency, but to offer concrete proposals for how, ultimately, the agency's operations might be made more efficient and effective and its land-management activities maintained, expanded, and improved. In short, the objective of 193 Million Acres is to find paths toward a healthier and more resilient US Forest Service.

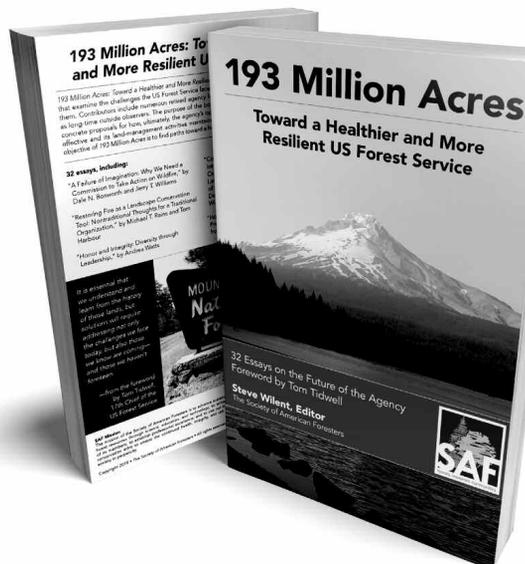
"A Failure of Imagination: Why We Need a Commission to Take Action on Wildfire," by Dale N. Bosworth and Jerry T. Williams

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**Thinned vs. unthinned on the A-Z project.**

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form to pulp mills or as biomass used by wood-to-energy producers. Nothing is wasted, and more thinning could easily be done.

### **Sustainable: In perpetuity**

My own back-of-the-envelope estimate is that about one-third of the Colville could be actively managed in perpetuity, another third could be managed with a lighter touch—again in perpetuity—and the remaining third ought to be left alone, and maybe even added to the nation's Wilderness system.

Our collaborative group wants to see more Wilderness acres designated on the Colville, but they also want to see a significant increase in the pace and scale of collaborative restoration work. The Colville has about 250,000 acres of overstocked and beetle-infested trees. These trees have already been damaged by large fires and are more susceptible to insects and diseases. They are ready to burn, and will burn if the Forest Service cannot find ways to move beyond its current pace of treating 4,000 acres per year.

Our collaborative has recommended that between 15,000 and 20,000 acres be treated annually. Fortunately, we still have the skill sets and capacity necessary to harvest, process, and market the added volume. In Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona, such infrastructure no longer exists.

Our family's capital investments in small-diameter milling technologies have given us a very good grounding

in managing thinning costs. From experience, we know that most of the work needed on the Colville National Forest will generate about \$750 per acre that could be reinvested in more restoration activity—at the county level. The point is that, contrary to what you may have heard, the costs associated with restoring natural resiliency need not be borne by taxpayers. We have the capacity to treat more acres within our working circles.

The key to turning money-losing projects into revenue-neutral projects lies in selectively removing a few larger trees from each project to cover the added planning and restoration costs. The alternative is to purposefully allow these trees to burn in stand-replacing wildfires, then hand taxpayers the fire-fighting bill. Why would we do this when we have the knowledge and tools needed to restore natural

resiliency *before* wildfires strike?

Thinning overstocked forests isn't a new idea. The Forest Service conducted its first experimental thinnings at the Fort Valley Experimental Station in northern Arizona more than 100 years ago. The work continues to the present day and is well documented in research reports and repeat photography. Similar demonstration projects can be found in every western state.

By volume, 44 percent of the annual gross growth on the Colville dies that same year. If these were your trees that you had planted and paid for, how much mortality would you be willing to accept? Think about it. Every American owns a share of this forest. Is a 44 percent annual loss in growth acceptable?

You might be surprised to learn that the Colville is in better condition than any other national forest east of the Washington Cascades. On these forests, cumulative net growth is a *minus* 58.253 million cubic feet annually. Mortality (327.2 million cubic feet) exceeds gross growth (268.95 million cubic feet) by 58.253 million cubic feet. No private landowner could ever accept such a loss, yet our country does. Why?

The latest estimate is that about 80 million acres (125,000 square miles) of western national forestland are in Condition Class 2 or 3, meaning it is ready to burn or soon will be. (Forests in Condition Class 1 are generally healthy).

This is an area almost twice the size of the entire state of Washington. Why on earth do our national forest shareholders—that's all 324 million of us US citizens—accept this loss? I don't

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understand it.

Some western national forests are doomed because the mills that once provided commercially viable markets for timber are gone. About 700 mills have closed for good over the last 30 years, which is in large part a result of the federal government's decision to shutter the timber sale program it built up following World War II.

The old federal timber sale program has gone the way of our society's ever-shifting felt necessities. We value different things today than we did in the post-war years. Aesthetic—some say spiritual—values now trump timber production in the West's national forests. That's fine, but these values are now being lost in stand-replacing wildfires.

### **Increasing the capacity of collaboratives**

Many conservationists now support thinning and prescribed fire as tools for restoring natural resiliency. And this is why our company has, for the last 15 years, actively supported increasing forest collaborative capacity in the West. Unfortunately, collaboratives cannot by themselves circumvent confusing and often conflicting federal environmental laws that—thanks to abuses of the Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA)—have become fertile ground for lawyers representing groups that oppose efforts to restore forests. In effect, EAJA hands taxpayers the bill for environmental litigation. What was Congress thinking?

Only Congress can guide the collab-

oratives through the legal minefield it has created. House and Senate members appear to be taking the first necessary steps within the framework of the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017, which requires litigants to come to the collaborative table with their own restoration proposals. Simply saying “no” will no longer be sufficient reason to shelve restoration projects that are often years in the making.

There is no way of knowing if this provision of the act will survive the House-Senate reconciliation process, which will occur well ahead of the publication of this book, but if it does, arbitration panels will decide which forest restoration proposal most closely matches respective national forest planning documents.

Removing the litigation threat is critical to the continuing success of the West's collaborative groups, because, without viable markets for small diameter trees that we and a few others provide, restoring natural resiliency is neither affordable nor possible. As a friend bluntly observed a few years ago, “No mill, no market, no forest.”

The current situation in central Washington is a perfect example of the harm litigation has done. The Nature Conservancy is trying to find investment partners with whom it can join in the construction and operation of a sawmill that would process small-diameter timber thinned from nearby overstocked national forests. Despite two years of looking, not a single partner has stepped forward, nor will one until the \$100 million construction cost can be paired with an uninterrupted supply of federal timber sufficient to amortize all costs over a 20-year period. No such supply arrangement is possible so long as the threat of litigation remains.

Our company is very interested in The Nature Conservancy's central Washington sawmill proposal. We know the organization well and think highly

of their work in forest conservation, but there is no way we would invest our family's capital in such an uncertain political climate. Again, short of a guaranteed supply of timber sufficient to amortize the investment, no investor can successfully step forward.

To restore lost investor confidence, we are told conservationists are considering a super-sized A-to-Z project similar to the one we pioneered on the Colville National Forest. Instead of the Forest Service conducting the environmental analysis as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Vaagen Bros. engaged a private contractor to conduct the analysis and then write an environmental assessment (EA) for the proposed project. But a super-sized project—with its super-sized Environmental Impact Statement—would cost millions of dollars.

It is common knowledge that we funded the A-to-Z Environmental Impact Statement, including the cost of having Cramer Fish Sciences prepare the necessary documents under Forest Service direction. Completing the required documentation took a fraction of the time and money the Forest Service commits—and we followed the same exacting rules they follow.

One might fairly ask why we were able to complete the process in less time and at a lower cost. One answer is that the federal government generally can't do anything as cheaply or efficiently as the private sector. But the main reason was that our researchers were not interrupted by a wildfire season or redirected to some other project that was suddenly deemed more important. Nor were we demoralized by the prospect of appeals or litigation. Many in the Forest Service have lost the courage of their own convictions and are no longer willing to use the regulatory tools Congress has provided in hopes of speeding work on collaboratively designed projects. Yet several recent federal court rulings have



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avored the Forest Service. My guess is that judges admire what they see in this uniquely American problem-solving tool we call collaboration.

Where strong leadership exists at the regional and supervisory levels, the Forest Service is moving beyond its fear of being sued by serial litigators. I credit the collaboratives with helping restore the agency's faith in its own ability to do good, legally defensible work. The spirit and intent of these projects underscores our nation's conservation ethic, the necessity of citizen resolve, and a "can do" attitude that has been missing from federal forest management for too long.

### Communities at the core

We still have some hurdles to cross concerning wildfire suppression funding, post-fire timber salvage harvesting, "green" timber sales, future Wilderness designations, and funding for rural timber towns devastated by the collapse of the old federal timber sale program. These towns are surrounded by national forests. They can't reinvent themselves in some new and dramatically different likeness. They are what they are: old timber, mining, and farm towns. Amazon won't be building its new campus in Kettle Falls or Lone, and New York's Metropolitan Opera won't be moving to Colville anytime soon.

But these communities have something in them that you won't find in New York, Seattle, or any other metropolitan area in our country: people who know how to care for forests. Some are professionally-trained foresters, biologists or engineers, but many of our neighbors know what they know because they've lived in forests all their lives. They are hands-on people with generational knowledge who know how to get things done. They work with nature every day of their lives. They are the heart and soul of northeast Washington.

Who better to help the Forest Service care for the Colville National Forest than the people who live in it and depend on it for their every use and necessity? It belongs as much to them as it does to every American. They are the rural links in a human chain that stretches south to Spokane and west to Seattle and Portland.

There are countless thousands of us

who are, in one way or another, socially, spiritually, culturally, or economically dependent on the wellbeing of the Colville National Forest: Wilderness advocates, hunters, loggers, fishers, sawmill workers, conservationists, native Americans, snowmobilers, retail merchants, school teachers, elected officials, hikers, campers, skiers—and lumbermen, like me.

It has taken us years to really get to know one another, but we've persevered in our shared belief that we could accomplish more by working together than we could by going our separate ways. And we have, mainly by being patient and respectful of one another's differing points of view.

We don't always immediately agree on the finer points, but we do stand on common ground and we are committed to helping the Forest Service find ways to treat more acres annually. Coalescing change in a centralized bureaucracy as large as the Forest Service isn't easy. The decision-making process is slowly migrating to the local level, where it belongs, but restoring resiliency in our national forests requires that we also restore public confidence in the whole idea that managing forests is a better option than watching them burn.

Big wildfires provide teachable moments, but as soon as the smoke clears, the news media and public lose interest. Out of sight, out of mind. That's the bad news. The good news is that the collaborative piece of this story—the human-interest element— isn't dying between wildfire seasons. Even the most hardened journalists seem to see collaboration for what it is: a forum open to anyone who shares our interest in protecting our national forest heritage. We remain a work in progress, but we have come a long, long way in 15 persistent years. ♦

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*Duane Vaagen is a third-generation Northeast Washington lumberman. His grandfather operated portable cedar mills before and during World War II. His father, Bert, and uncle, Bud, started Vaagen Brothers Lumber Company in 1952. Today, Vaagen Brothers owns mills in Colville and Usk, Washington, and Midway, British Columbia.*

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## Policy Scoreboard

*Editor's Note: To keep SAF members informed of state society policy activities, Policy Scoreboard is a regular feature in the Western Forester. The intent is to provide a brief explanation of the policy activity—you are encouraged to follow up with the listed contact person for detailed information.*

### OSAF Approves Updated Position Statement on Active Management to Achieve and Maintain Active Forests.

At the February 2, 2019, OSAF Executive Committee Meeting in Troutdale, an updated version of our position statement entitled "Active Management to Achieve and Maintain Active Forests" was approved by the ExCom. Only minor changes were made to the existing position. The core position states that OSAF "supports active forest management prescribed by professional foresters to achieve and maintain healthy public and private forests, consistent with land management objectives. To accomplish this, a wide range of proven forest management strategies and tools must be available to forestry professionals. These include carefully planned uses of forest thinning (sometimes removing trees over a wide range of sizes and ages), approved chemicals (e.g., fertilizers and pesticides), prescribed burning, sanitation and salvage of designated dead and dying trees, regeneration harvesting (e.g., clearcutting, shelterwood, selection) and mixed species planting as appropriate. Many federal forests in Oregon now have an especially acute and long-term need for active management that will require diverse strategies and tools, including road access and administrative flexibility to effectively expand and maintain such management. Broad benefits, from wildlife to recreation to forest products, can be achieved and sustained through active management on public and private forestlands." The updated statement can be found at: [www.oregon.forestry.org/oregon/policy/general](http://www.oregon.forestry.org/oregon/policy/general). Contact: Mark Buckbee, OSAF Policy co-chair, [buckbeefamily@msn.com](mailto:buckbeefamily@msn.com). ♦