Forest Service Fights for Life: Forest Service Facing Bitter Assault
By George C. Wilson Washington Post Staff Writer

The ravages of clear-cutting, apparent in this area of the Bitterroot National Forest, have inspired debate.

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The rancher turns his Cessna toward a big bare spot in the otherwise densely wooded mountainside of the Bitterroot National Forest outside of Missoula, Mont.

From the plane's back seat, the forester who used to manage the Bitterroot yells over the engine noise: "This is what we're fighting. There'll be nothing left of our forests if this keeps up."

The fight for the Bitterroot, it turns out, is part of a much larger battle—one that amounts to the biggest assault on the U.S. Forest Service since its founding 68 years ago.

And yet, like most other environmental issues, the battle is not a clear struggle between good and evil but an argument intensified by the difficulty of the choices.

Conservationists, fearing timber companies are about to cut down more than the national forest can stand, charge the U.S. Forest Service is derelict.

Politicians blame the Nixon administration for emphasizing lumber production at the expense of such other uses of the forest as hiking and fishing.

Timber companies, running short of wood from privately owned lands, chafe at the government's failure to grow more trees in the national forests.

And the Forest Service itself complains that it takes so long for a tree to grow that neither past Congresses nor administrations have been willing to take the long view and appropriate enough money for reforesting.

The feeling that time is finally running out makes for shrill debate.

"Unless Congress can stop (Agriculture Secretary Earl) Butz from overcutting the forests, there will be little timber left to manage," complains Guy Matthew (Brandy) Brandborg, the retired ranger who used to supervise the Bitterroot before the days of clear-cutting.

Brandborg contends that clear-cutting—taking every tree, large and small, out of a designed area rather than selective cutting of mature timber—is killing his beloved Bitterroot and other national forests.

From the air, the Bitterroot does look like a forest wounded and scarred because broad splotches of bare land left from clearcutting. Brandborg

See FOREST, A4, Col. 1
Forest Service Facing Bitter Assault

FOREST, From A1

"service as a guide that day in the Bitterroot was Richard B. Ford, in hopes of returning national forestry to more conservative harvesting techniques."

The protest movement, he added, "rounds the Bitterroot into national forests, but the way the Forest Service is managing the people's woodlands, they may still be fighting a battle to save the Bitterroot."

"We do not believe the Forest Service let us in the Bitterroot," said the residents of the House Appropriations subcommittee which manages the Forest Service budget. "We believe that the service is not providing the funds necessary to properly manage the Bitterroot."

"The Forest Service is too focused on the money it receives from the timber industry," Ford said. "They are not providing enough funds to properly manage the forest."

"We have to stop this," Ford added. "We are fighting to save the Bitterroot and we will not give up until we get the proper management of this forest."

The Sierra Club charges the bill, "as possible, as fast as possible, with no regard for a sustained yield". However, some other statutes of the forest favor the nation's timber lands will be overused that way timber lands have been.

The beleaguered head of the Sierra Club, the descending, Gen. Daniel G. McCracken, now more fully aware that the Forest Service is actually cutting more trees than the 1.6 billion board feet of timber the national forests are supposed to produce each year, the 1.6 billion board feet of timber the Forest Service is supposed to produce each year, the Forest Service is going to use the money for recreation and other programs.

But, on the other hand, they argue that clear-cutting is still a way to produce more timber. Some say, "We are fighting to save the Bitterroot, but we also need the money for recreation and other programs."

As for former Bitterroot Rounders absentee, McGurie said he is one of those Forest Service alumni who feel "that any change in the way they managed it is not good."

Congress itself, McGurie said, discussing the shortage of funds for timber production, "traditionally has been more liberal in approving the funds to purchase the timber program than it has been for recreation and other programs."

Thus he said, the Forest Service needs to do more to make sure it is using its money as effectively as possible. "We need to make sure we are doing the best job we can to produce more timber," he said.

"We have a balanced program," McGurie said. "We have more funds in timber, including more funding proportionately for forest and recreation activities." This is what I say every year."

We are far behind in things we ought to be doing," McGurie said. "We still need a Congress, neither Commerce nor the administration has a chance to come through with the $3 billion in money in the past, the 3 billion, as one more year is not going to make that much difference."

"I have been a member of the Senate for at least a decade," McGurie continued. "The forest and recreation program has been going to look no farther ahead than the end of the session. I am offering a bill, the 3 billion dollars, to achieve this."

This year—given the environment of war, our military, in and out of Congress—just might be different.