Unlike national parks created primarily to preserve natural beauty and outdoor recreation, our national forests were working forests established to provide timber and water for the nation’s benefit. Federal laws and policies outline how national forests are used and managed.

In the mid-1800’s, many believed the wood supply was unlimited. Large areas were logged for agriculture or not replanted. As populations moved west, concerns grew and Congress took action. After World War II, national forests provided wood for our growing nation and a place for expanding outdoor recreation.

“Caring for the Land and Serving People”

Today, we want and expect a lot from our national forests. Management priorities have shifted from mainly protecting timber from fire to providing a wide range of uses from Wilderness, recreation, wildlife habitat and timber production. These management changes mostly came through conflict. Numerous environmental laws passed in the 1960-70s vastly changed how federal lands were managed and increased public involvement in the decision making process.

Conflict and Litigation

Bitter conflicts and litigation over forest use in the 1980-90s involved a range of issues from spotted owls, old growth, fire, and Wilderness. This gridlock set the stage for President Clinton’s 1994 Northwest Forest Plan that re-designated forest use and established a new ecosystem approach to resource management on federal lands. Policies from this time drastically reduced timber harvest, resulting today in dense forests that are less resilient to drought, disease, changes in climate and fire.