

Forestry in a Changing World: Will We Adapt or Be Left in the Woods?

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The world has changed remarkably over the past decade. To be effective in ensuring that the broad field of forestry keeps pace with change we must constantly be adapting or else be “left in the woods” by others who are more effective in meeting the needs of a changing society.

The most important global issue is world population, the rise of Chinese and Indian economies, and the critical impact of increasing population on sustaining the world’s wood resources in the face of massive deforestation. Recent global assessments such as the IPPC Reports, the Millennium Report, and the Stern Report all indicate that stresses on the world’s ecosystems are reaching tipping points. Other global signals are changes in world trade of forest products, the severe impact of illegal logging, and the role of planted forests in both providing wood resources and in sequestering carbon. The important question is how should forestry adapt to these dramatic changes?

Changes in US forestry can be seen in the general performance of the forest products industry, the dynamics of international trade, and changes in US competitiveness in productivity and global markets. An astounding change is the rapidity in which forest industry has divested itself of timberlands. Similarly in the public sector, criticisms of the role and function of national forests have resulted in dramatic declines in harvests, reversal of fire suppression policies, and emphasis on threatened and endangered species. These concerns have caused the Forest Service to change management emphasis to restoration. Changes in the balance of political power in the 110th Congress is bringing changed focus on environmental issues, climate change, and a broader discussion of the role of forests in the 2007 Farm Bill. Public debate is increasing on such topics as the role of forests in providing ecosystem services, carbon sequestration and offsets, cap-and-trade carbon markets, production of cellulosic ethanol and wood pellets, and green building standards.

The profession of forestry is based on education and research. Despite increasing recognition of the importance of the world’s forests, enrollment in undergraduate programs in forestry has declined dramatically in both the US and Canada. New programs in environmental science appear to be more attractive to prospective students. Research in forestry is marked by large decreases in federal research capacity, stagnation of funding for research and extension, and the demise of industrial research following industrial divestment of timberlands. The forestry profession is having difficulty in overcoming public perception that it is allied with exploitive practices.

Never-the-less, the future of forestry is bright. Whether the profession will adapt or be left in the woods, however, depends on convincing the public by communication and performance that it shares fundamental societal core values and visions for the future.