

Our Forests - - Mine Or Crop?

By R. M. Connor

Almost a quarter of our original forests are in the same virgin state as when the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. These are located almost entirely in the so-called "Inland-Empire" of Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho and northern California. This is the belt of the big trees from which comes most of the timber America uses. If wisely managed these forests are capable of supplying America in perpetuity.

They are not being wisely managed but are being "mined" or logged off at a rate that recalls the reckless denuding of our Eastern timber lands. There is nothing wrong in cutting down and using mature trees, any more than in harvesting ripe corn. Trees are meant to be used. But for every board foot of lumber produced, 167 board feet are left in the forest, utter waste. Beyond the mere waste in lumber, the forest itself is being ruined by the methods in use.

When a virgin stand of pine and fir, with a sprinkling of inferior species, is to be logged, the tendency is to harvest the greatest quantity of the best timber in the shortest time possible. The lumber industry is so highly competitive that any other course would spell financial ruin for the lumberman. So, only the largest and most perfect specimens are taken, the defective and smaller trees being disregarded as unprofitable. To protect the younger growth would involve an expense the lumberman cannot well bear. The high speed methods are so destructive that when the logger passes on to a further stand he leaves behind him a wilderness of battered snags and stumps, with here and there a diseased or defective veteran standing watch over the shambles. Fire in due time sweeps over the area and completely denudes the land of all living cover. If they haven't already beaten the fire to its victim, insects finish the job. Nature cannot restore in a century what has been

wiped out by the logger in a few months.

This waste and destruction continue in spite of the realization that a timber famine can be the only end. Sentimental nature lovers blame the lumberman; he should be required "by law" to install forest management plans or to restrain his destructive methods. That is like requiring a poverty stricken farmer to stop working his land so hard and to use fertilizer, while his children starve before his eyes. The lumberman cannot be blamed, even though he is unwittingly destroying his own future livelihood.

Conservationists, with the best of motives, have tried two expedients to stem this wasteful exploitation. First, pressure has been exerted to allocate the forests to community ownership, never again to hear the ring of woodsman's axe. Such a provision has been written into the New York State Constitution, so that no cutting may be made for any purpose on land embraced in the state forest. As a result, the people of New York, living in the very center of a great potential timber producing area, are using lumber cut and sawed on the West Coast.

The second approach to the problem is the tree-planting program. Millions of young trees are being set out annually at great expense while we trample down the young growth which nature has scattered so prolifically in our existing forests. It is interesting to observe that nature invariably brings up young forests where she chooses, and both the process and product are infinitely better than anything man can accomplish. Our logging methods and our conservation policies appear to stalemate each other.

Something more pressing than



competition is driving the industry at the terrific pace it now sets. That is taxation. Let us examine the effect of our tax system on a piece of bare land suitable for forest growth. The assessment is at first nominal; but as trees appear on this land the assessment goes up. Allow those trees to reach maturity and the assessment will be increased to nearly the value of the mature forest. It takes a generation to produce a forest. All those years the owner of the prospective forest has been paying an ever-increasing tax bill, which will more than eat up the value of the lumber when finally cut. This is the principal reason why it is uneconomic to plant and grow trees. The destructive tendency of our policy of taxing production is well demonstrated in this field.

Those who own the forests of the west would prefer to log their holdings carefully by the rotation method. That is, to cut only a portion of the area each year so that fresh cutting could be recommenced when the entire cycle had gone round. That would be more profitable in the end. But the forest is taxed on its current stumpage value and the taxes devour any profit that might be realized from deferred cutting. Thus the owners are forced to cut as much as possible each year and then to permit the cut-over land to become tax delinquent.

This condition could be largely overcome if the owner paid a tax on the value of the land only, until such time as he was ready to cut, and then paid a tax on the timber cut in the form of a "yield tax." It would pay him to protect the forest. The present glut of the lumber market with its attendant cut-throat competitive methods would be curtailed. The nation would be sure of its forests and the people of their lumber supply.

Can this be done in a practical way? It is being done at present by the federal government, as well as by far-seeing state and municipal units. In the far west the federal government retained ownership of

considerable forest areas. It also repurchased at fancy prices other lands from the original grantees when it finally realized the folly of its public land policy. This forest land has been held out of use while the private lands surrounding it have been exploited. The day has now arrived when many of the large timber companies have either exhausted their holdings or sold them in small lots to avoid the heavy tax burden. They must either purchase timber from these government holdings or go out of business.

Here the yield tax principle comes into play. The federal government is not in the logging business and does not do any cutting. It merely leases to the lumber company the timber rights on government land. But it does so with reservations. A price is worked out, based on the cost of removing the timber, market conditions and the expense of reasonable forest management methods. The price of the dominant species to be logged is usually slightly higher than the market price for stumps, but a very nominal price is placed on the inferior species which the lumber company would not touch if logging on its own land or left to its own devices. All equipment is furnished by the lumber company.

The government, working through the Forest Service, stringently supervises the operations. Clearly marked are the trees to be cut, defective trees, inferior species which might dominate the forest if the better species only were removed. Scalers are maintained in the woods to see that a fair estimate is made of the timber cut. The methods to be used are minutely specified. Those involving the least possible damage to young growth are chosen and many of the high speed features of the old wasteful methods are eliminated. Spark arrestors on all machinery are prescribed, as well as strict regulations concerning smoking or the use of fire in the woods. Further, a healthy mature tree to provide future seeding must be left standing on each acre cut. After the logging operations are over, fire lines must be drawn around each twenty acres and the brush and refuse piled for burning. Violation of these provisions entails severe penalties, even to the extent of voiding the contract and confiscating all equipment.

Under this method the lumberman is really paying a yield tax on such timber as he uses. What are its effects? First, the government is paid for the care and maintenance of the forest. Secondly, the forest is

conserved; it is made available for the use of future generations. Three years from the date of cutting an untrained eye could not detect that it was other than a virgin forest. In ten years it will be ready for recutting, using the same process as before. Thirdly, the lumberman is better off. His future source of supply is assured. And last, but not least, are the many collateral benefits derived from a perpetual forest. The soil and water are preserved, flood danger is lessened, wildlife and game are secure in their natural habitat, and man is able to enjoy the recreation that comes from contact with the wilderness.

Obviously, since it is to the lumberman's advantage to pay one yield tax on his cut instead of paying endlessly on the forest itself, the next logical step for him is to cease owning forest land altogether. If he can always buy the right to log his timber, why should he bother with owning the land the timber grows on? Many lumbermen are seeing this point and selling their lands to the government.

Until this taxing problem is solved, the nation's forests will continue to be exploited. It is in the interest of all that the forests be restored to the ownership of the community.