

## **‘Truth’: A Casualty of the Biscuit Fire**

The last of the Biscuit fire salvage sales is nearing completion, marking the end of a significant and controversial chapter in the history of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest. It also provides a time for review, and a time to test the claims of many about what the Biscuit Recovery project was or was not.

The Biscuit Fire Recovery Project served as a lightning rod in the national debate over post-fire logging. It attracted protests, congressional hearings, news stories, publications, scientific debate, and of course, many lawsuits. The conflict was serious, heated, and waged with a “no-holds-barred” intensity to a degree I have rarely witnessed in my 30 years in natural resource management. Unfortunately, there were casualties, and from my perspective, one of the most saddening of these casualties was ‘truth’.

Claims were made about the ‘Biscuit Fire Recovery Project’ that frequently left my staff and I open-mouthed in wonder that otherwise reasonable people could make them, and that others would unquestionably embrace them as true. Here are some examples of actual newspaper headlines:

*“Healthy Old Growth Trees to Be logged in the Biscuit Fire Area”* accompanied by a picture of an unburned old growth forest. **Truth:** no unburned old-growth forests were salvage logged, and only fire-killed trees, or trees that constituted a legitimate safety hazard, were authorized for cutting.

*“The U.S. Forest Service lost more than \$9 million logging trees burned by the massive 2002 Biscuit fire in southwestern Oregon”* **Truth:** we spent about \$5.8 million to analyze, document, prepare, administer, and legally defend these salvage sales. The sales generated over \$12.3 million to the taxpayer, and provided about \$40 million of value to the local communities. One critic published a prediction that our loss would be almost \$14 million without ever bothering to ask to look at our books. Where did that come from?

In court, there was testimony that the sales were located in Wilderness (which would have been illegal); that we didn’t retain enough snags for wildlife (have you seen the millions of snags still present throughout the Biscuit fire area?); and that our goal of salvage logging to assist with reforestation was proven unnecessary by research findings.

That last claim was made again and again. Opponents frequently misrepresented our intentions for salvage logging as though we believed logging was necessary for forest recovery. My decision to salvage log was to realize both the potential jobs for local communities and the economic return to the Federal government. I also knew these sales would be implemented with rigorous environmental protections and generate funds for recovery efforts.

One claim heard often was that these sales were illegal. My staff received letters and phone calls from people around the country aghast that we were engaging in actions so

obviously against the law. The courts, however, disagreed and ruled in favor of the Forest Service in over seventeen rulings. Seventeen. The Forest Service has prevailed in every court decision.

“Truth” is an unacceptable casualty in matters concerning debate over the management of our National Forests. These lands are treasures, and I am charged with managing them according to law and for your greatest good for the long term. To do so, I need the productive participation of citizens willing to acknowledge and deal in what is true, even if it doesn’t support their beliefs or desires. There is hope and opportunity for good results when honest people deal honestly with each other. Un-researched, unsupported, exaggerations and intentional misrepresentations designed to inflame rather than to enlighten serve no common good.

One last truth you should know. The time and resources spent battling such claims could have been more productively spent restoring our landscapes in hope of avoiding another ‘Biscuit’ fire on your lands.

**Scott Conroy, Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest Supervisor, May 7, 2007**