

“No forests, no rivers”: Why forests matter

**Rick Cables, Rocky Mountain Regional Forester, U.S. Forest Service
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INTRODUCTION

Our most famous Chief of the United States Forest Service said long ago that the “connection between forests and rivers is like that between a father and son; no forests, no rivers.”

Gifford Pinchot, who invented American forestry, knew something most of us never think about. Without forests to capture snow and hold water, and then to filter and slowly release clean water to the rivers and streams, we would have both less water and less water quality.

You have only to look around Colorado’s famous Rockies to see that our forests are in trouble. What is less visible is that our water supplies and water quality are in trouble as a result.

I’ll address these issues in a moment.

First let me say it is an honor to have been asked to address all of you about water. I tell Forest Service people, tongue in cheek, that there are only three land management issues that really matter in the coming years; water, water, water.

You might ask, “What about climate change doesn’t it matter?” Of course, but I will not spend much time today addressing climate change, but not because it’s not critically important. Climate always affects people and the environment. It is part of the context of today and certainly affects water supply and demand. There are things we can do about climate change and things we probably can’t. We don’t have all the answers, but we know forests play a critical role in sequestering carbon and storing water.

What we do know is that we can change how we think about and work with each other where our common need for water is concerned. I am reminded that Denver Mayor Hickenlooper reached out to neighboring communities in the Denver area at the height of our drought in 2002 by offering that if they ran out of water, Denver Water would help them through that tough time. They could work out how to pay it back later.

It is that wonderful and honorable spirit of give and take for the common good that will mark the success of our efforts to provide water to each other in Colorado, and to all the other people who depend on this state and our public forests for their water as well.

I am here today to tell you that it is my intention and our intention in the US Forest Service to partner with you on water issues more than ever before. Many of you have been engaged in water projects large and small over the years and I want you to think of a very large brand new water project called “protecting the headwaters.” Without the headwaters many of the other water projects may not be relevant.

WORKING TOGETHER

I sometimes think that water issues are so intractable that we can never solve them. Standing on the banks of the Colorado River, it's hard to think that water from our mountains in Colorado is filling up a bathtub in Las Vegas, Nevada, or washing a car in Southern California. People in 143 counties in 10 states use water that falls in the Rocky Mountain Region.

I am committed to the idea of working together that Mayor Hickenlooper so perfectly illustrated for all of us. Water law is complex and the issues are life and death for people, for businesses, for healthy communities and healthy ecosystems. We can and must work together to do all that human beings can do to see that water we have in common is shared for the greatest good for all, including for the living forests that provide the water in the first place.

We can do it. We have made great progress in working together to make sure our air is clean. Denver's commitment to cleaning up air on the Front Range and their success is now the stuff of textbooks. We can think of water the same way. Clean air and clean water are life. Forests of living healthy trees produce lots of both.

Working together is the only way I see forward on water issues.

In the end, having enough clean water is your focus as a Water Congress and our focus as caretakers of your forests. It is also the focus of government at every level, especially in the West where unprecedented growth, drought and other factors such as insects and fire, have affected water supplies.

We are seeing the affects of trees dying on a massive scale in Colorado and other Western forests. Over 2 million acres of our trees are dead from tiny insects. Soon, those trees will fall to the forest floor like pick-up sticks and then at some point probably catch on fire. Imagine a slow hot fire burning for days, baking the soil, killing or destroying every living and organic thing in the soil, and even removing the top inch or so of mineral soil because the fire is so severe and so intense. It's not hard to imagine. We've all seen it before.

And then imagine the winter snow pack with no trees to shade it or hold it in place. Come spring thaw and spring rain and the water on the mountain tops will roar down the denuded slopes, filling our rivers and reservoirs with sand and gravel and ash, leaving big gullies, and Heaven forbid taking out small communities. None of this is hypothetical. Any one of you could describe and have even lived through and personally seen exactly what I am talking about.

There is change coming to both water supply and demand in Colorado and elsewhere. Some of it we can do something about if we work together. Some of it, like the weather, we can't. What is certain is that we must try.

WATER TOWERS OF THE WEST

I said that water is life. The high country, your National Forests are the highest water towers of the West, provides the largest and most reliable source of clean water for our people, coming to us directly from the ecosystems we sustain and protect. Why do we protect ecosystems? Because ecosystems protect people. Just thinking about Colorado, we have millions of acres of wonderful, productive, forested ecosystems in our combined public and private forests. All forested lands

affect water quantity and quality. Because our national forests are the highest elevations in our watersheds they play a particularly significant role. Here are some things that may surprise you about our National Forests across the Country:

- In the lower 48 states, National Forests account for 9% of the area and yield 18% of the water
- In the 11 western states, National Forests are 19% of the area and yield 51% of the water
- In Colorado, National Forests are 22% of the area and yield 68% of the water

National Forests and other public and private forest lands are a big deal in Colorado. Together we supply over 70 percent of public surface water supplies.

Forests play a significant role in providing water. The Forest Service plays a vital role in sustaining healthy resilient watersheds.

Most of you know by now that we cannot stop the mountain pine beetle epidemic. We have always relied on periodic fires for forest thinning in lodge pole pine, and now and then cold winters in the mountains to control the beetle populations (it would take two weeks of sustained temperatures below – 40F to kill the bugs, according to Kurt Allen, Regional entomologist). During previous decades we eliminated wildfire from these forested systems and never mitigated the effects of removing this critical natural process. Meanwhile, our mild winters mean the beetles will keep killing pine forests until they run out of food.

The beetle epidemic is nearing two million acres of almost completely dead trees. We have been treating some important but relatively small forest tracts for the past three years to protect communities, facilities, and source watersheds.

So much more needs to be done, and we must use the tools we have to bring more resilience and diversity to the forests in Colorado. This work needs to happen sooner than later and on a very large scale.

GOOD NEWS – Economic Stimulus

There is good news. The various economic stimulus proposals that many of you have seen contain hundreds of millions of dollars to support shovel ready projects on the ground in the National Forests and on other public and private lands as well. Portions of this money will come to the State of Colorado, the Rocky Mountain Region, and other Colorado forests, public and private. Among our highest priorities will certainly be water. Our emphasis will be on finding ways to spend some of the money to improve forest health and resilience, to deal with the dead and dying trees, and to undertake projects that improve or maintain roads and deal appropriately with other sources of sedimentation.

I believe an important window of opportunity is opening now across the Nation, and here in Colorado, where leaders like Secretaries Salazar and Vilsack, the Colorado Federal delegation, and Colorado's water leaders will have an opportunity to talk about what makes the most sense to secure reliable supplies of clean water from healthy living forests in Colorado. We need your voice.

The Administration is now searching for ideas on how to best use the new money to leverage the economic stimulus package to create jobs and work to have a lasting positive effect in every State. It's an exciting time to be working with water policy and forest management in Colorado.

Hopefully the stimulus package helps, but we must look for other ways to fund the work in our headwaters. Another idea to increase investment in our high country water towers is asking the estimated 3 million Front Range Colorado water subscribers to step up and contribute directly. Would water users be willing to contribute 50 cents or a dollar a month to invest under the auspices of a vehicle like Colorado Senate Bill 221 which gives water providers the ability to raise money to improve watershed resilience by issuing bonds? Even more, if Las Vegas, or Los Angeles or Phoenix gets on board, the amount per customer could be more widely spread across all water users.

I know, I know, the idea of increasing the water bill in these times will be unpopular. But even in tight economic times we must look to protect our water supplies and watersheds or a tough situation could be far worse and much more expensive for everyone. Let me tell you why. Denver Water can attest to the cost of dredging storage reservoirs after a large fire has denuded the landscape. Similarly, it will be much less expensive for tax payers to remove beetle killed trees that will fall on roads, trails and power lines now than it will be when the trees fall down or blow over.

And certainly governments need help with important investments in our watersheds if we are to succeed. Santa Fe, New Mexico, has taken timely steps to manage their municipal watershed to ensure clean water for the City. So has Los

Alamos and so have other cities that learned from the past about the importance of resilient and healthy ecosystems as a precondition for adequate clean water.

These are not the only ideas by any means and I am sure every one of you has great ideas that would help us all.

We are grappling with how best to use, store, and transport water in our forests and grasslands; how much water to leave in our streams to meet the purposes of publicly reserved lands; and how much water is diverted for other uses.

Some key elements that will help us achieve the goals of our shared water emphasis are reflected in this publication by the Colorado Foundation for Water Education:

- **Conservation:** We are upgrading our facilities with water-saving technologies to reduce our own water footprint.
- **Forest Health:** We continue to treat our source watersheds to fortify the forest against insect and wildfire damage, our eyes firmly fixed on creating the next forest.
- **Watershed Restoration:** We know healing eroding roads and abandoned mines will increase our supplies of clean water and reduce costs of water treatment and facility maintenance.

I believe cooperation beats confrontation hands-down when it comes to solving problems. Our Memorandum of Understanding with the State of Colorado in 2004 put a framework in place for collaboration that has helped us resolve some challenging water issues.

Just last year, Senate Bill 221 established a process to help fund forest treatments in source watersheds to protect water supply from wildfire damage. Combined with the tools developed by the Front Range Watershed-Wildfire Protection Group, this funding process positions us all to better improve forest conditions and protect water supplies.

Final Thoughts

We live in exciting and challenging times. Our water problems are not simple. Solving them will take all of our collective energy. We have proven that we can work together and get good things done on the ground. As I conclude, I hope you will remember three things:

1. Water is life. As caretakers of our high country water towers, the Forest Service is committed to working with you to meet water challenges, now and in the future – in ways far beyond our traditional approaches.
2. All of us who care about our future water supply and quality will need to join together. Please invite the Forest Service into those conversations to seek smart solutions, to enact helpful laws, to find funding sources, and to build working arrangements that will restore our source watersheds in this century. We are the source.
3. Active forest watershed stewardship on a grand scale is vital to our water future. As Gifford Pinchot said, “no forests, no rivers.”

We need your help. Thank you for your time.