

FIA DATA: THE GOLD STANDARD

Forest Inventory and Analysis Client Meeting
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Remarks by James D. Petersen

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Thanks for inviting us to join you today.

My name is Jim Petersen. I am the Founder and President of the non-profit Evergreen Foundation.

I am also a working journalist of some 55 years, and I have been a steady consumer of FIA data for 30 of those 55 years.

Gatherings as stimulating as this one cause my mind to run a million miles an hour. At lunch, I wrote the following on a napkin:

“Quality of life and lifestyles anchored in the West’s great outdoors – assets nearly impossible to measure – are driving the public discourse, *not FIA data*, a fact that makes FIA data more important than ever.”

Then, while listening to Melissa Luchsh’s very informative presentation, I wrote this:

“We can’t log our way out of the West’s forest health crisis. Nor can we burn our way out. It is in the political minefield called ‘management’ that lies midway between the two ideas that science-based decisions must be made. Again, FIA data helps light the way to a better future for the West’s National Forests.

I was introduced to the wonders of FIA data – as well as Forest Service State and Private Forestry data - by the late Con Schallau, a PhD forest economist, who I met when he was still at the PNW station in Corvallis.

Did any of you know Con?

He was a member of our Evergreen Foundation Board of Directors for many years, and steady hand on our tiller.

The late Carl Stoltenberg, who was for many years the Dean of the College of Forestry at Oregon State, introduced me to Con in the spring of 1990. Carl had given me an open invitation to visit the college and its faculty anytime I wanted. Con’s office was the first one I visited. The second office was that of Mike Newton.

Does anyone here know Mike?

Mike is also an Evergreen Foundation director, and easily one of the brightest and most thought-provoking PhD botanists I’ve ever met.

Between Carl, Con and Mike, and the late Hal Salwasser, also an OSU forestry dean, and the late Jack Ward Thomas, a friend for more than 20 years, I got one helluva forestry education, especially for a guy whose lowly college degrees are in Journalism and Broadcasting!

I don’t have much time, so let me get right to the reason Julia and I drove nearly 400 miles to be with you this afternoon. We’re on our way to Moscow to participate in the 100th anniversary

celebration of the University of Idaho's College of Natural Resources. We thus cannot be here tomorrow, which is a shame because your program is excellent.

What I want you to know – and know well – is that for environmental writers with an ounce of gumption, or at least a desire to get their facts straight, FIA data is – or should be - the Gold Standard.

Furthermore, because of the deliberate and painstaking way in which FIA data is systematically collected, it is – or should be – the final arbiter of all disputes concerning gross growth, mortality, net growth and removals in National Forests.

I know this because I've spent hours talking with field foresters who gather data from survey plots the Forest Service first delineated 50 or more years ago. We use their data sets on our website and in print versions of *Evergreen* designed to quantify the precipitous decline in the health of National Forests in the western United States.

We first used FIA data in a 1989 *Evergreen* report titled, "Grey Ghosts in the Blue Mountains." Even then, insect mortality was easily visible in all directions from LaGrande, Oregon.

Hal Salwasser later told me he thought that we were the first to use the term "forest health." I don't know if this is true, but Hal thought it was, and we did use the term in our Blue Mountain report. I am not sure of its origin, but I'd spent a lot of time in the company of Boyd Wickman, a Forest Service entomologist at the agency's station in La Grande, so I suspect it is he who should get credit for the term.

Switch reels and come forward 28 years: the young biologist who collects FIA plot data on the Kingston Ranger District in the Idaho Panhandle National Forest – a half hour from where we live - will finish his first 10-year rotation next year.

Assuming he is still holds down the same fort, he will start over in the spring of 2019, revisiting plots he last visited 10 years ago. In my mind, there is something almost mystical about this kind of single-minded dedication to a task that has him counting trees – live and dead – in hundreds of one-acre survey plots.

He virtually lives in his pickup. Every Friday, he transmits his data to Jim Menlove in the FIA shop in Ogden, Utah. I suppose some of you know Jim. He's been a huge help to me over the last 10 years.

More recently, I have relied on Olaf Kuegler for Region 6 data sets quantifying growth, mortality and removals in National Forests easts of the Cascades in the State of Washington.

We have complimentary copies of our FIA reports for National Forests in Idaho, Montana and Washington. Let me assure you, the bar graphs on the cover of these reports have shocked and amazed more than one congressman who thought he knew it all.

With the help of a brilliant number cruncher who was working in the Forest Service timber shop in Albuquerque a few years ago, I found a way to visually describe the growth and mortality data you gather. Here is how I described the Washington-east-of-the-Cascades data Olaf sent me last summer.

“If annual mortality in National Forests east of the Washington Cascades could be compressed into one solid block of wood the dimensions of the Seahawk’s CenturyLink Stadium, the block would rise more than one mile into the sky.”

One mile this year, another mile next year and a third mile the year following. You get the picture.

Perhaps you’ve noticed the mad scramble in Congress to fix the fire borrowing mess. These reports – which rely solely on FIA data – have a lot to do with it.

So too does the considerable political influence of all the stakeholder collaboratives that have sprung up across the West over the last decade. We work closely with these groups, and believe the work they are doing is nothing short of remarkable. They need you and you need them, so if there is anything we can do to help you link with them, please let us know.

I also have with me this afternoon my last copy of “Grey Ghosts,” as well as a couple copies of “The Truth About America’s Forests,” an FIA masterpiece covering the entire United States.

We updated “The Truth” seven times in the 1990s, and gave away more than one million copies across these United States. We’d like to do No. 8, but funding for such happy adventures is scarce, so if it ever occurs, it will likely be a web-only version. Our website monitoring metrics tell us we are reaching about 100,000 viewers, not bad in the forestry world.

My message to you is simple and direct: Keep collecting data from survey plots, and keep your presentations as simple as possible. Your journalist clients aren’t generally very good with numbers, and they are easily stampeded into the weeds by whatever environmental cause dominates any given 24-hour news cycle.

Good data gathered consistently and systematically will always stand the test of time, and can only be corrupted deliberately by people who want to twist it to fit their own nefarious purposes. To keep your skirts clean, stay the hell out of the political fever swamps.

What you have is a worthy and worthwhile body of work that extends a long way back. I have printed reports dating from 1948. Long before computers, or even electric typewriters, to say nothing of integrated forest planning.

Back then, each forest resource – soil, water, timber, wildlife, water and recreation - was identified, quantified and discussed in its own separate report. Where maps were necessary, they were drawn by hand, sometimes by cartographers who used colored pencils, and later, felt tip pens.

How the Forest Service did all that work as a matter of routine – and did it so well – is its own miracle. But I'm glad it did because the body of work bears lasting witness to the fact that the agency has always been staffed by professionals who did their jobs with exceptional dedication and integrity. Most of what I know about forests and forestry, I learned from them. They took the time to teach me because they knew I was an old school journalist. Facts mattered to me. They still do.

I would be remiss if I did not note our strong and productive ties to Peter Kolb, a University of Montana forest ecologist; Todd Morgan, who spoke just before me, and is the forest economist of record at the University of Montana's Bureau of Business and Economic Research; Dennis Becker, who directs the Policy Analysis Group within the University of Idaho's College of Natural Resources; and Paul Hessburg, a brilliant landscape ecologist at the PNW's research station at Wenatchee. We are huge fans of Paul's megafire and managed fire research.

These four researchers – and you - are central to our long running effort to help the public and its elected representatives better understand our wildfire conundrum and what we can do to use fire constructively – in concert with mechanical thinning - to meet society's forest conservation and restoration goals. Their work dovetails very nicely with yours.

It is up to you - all of you - to maintain and build on the high standards of professionalism set by those who built the FIA program into what it is today: The Gold Standard for writers like me, who have devoted their lives to translating complex forest science into plain English.

If there is anything we can do to help you increase your own visibility on political or public radar screens, please ask. Thanks again for inviting us to be with you today.