



Timber lobbyist-turned-enviro longs to let forests burn

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Andy Stahl has never shied from breaking with old allies.

He started his career as a hero to loggers. Then he fought them to save the spotted owl in the Northwest forests, and environmentalists loved him.

Now, as head of green group Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, he is taking an unorthodox view on forest fires -- let them burn -- and throwing both sides overboard.

At 60, the former timber lobbyist-turned-environmentalist remains as independent-minded as ever. He sees his unusual career path as a strength.

"We need to understand the weakness of our own arguments. There's no better way than being in the shoes of your opponent," Stahl said in a telephone interview from his Eugene, Ore., office.

Stahl's friends say his passion for technical information and hard data helps him see past emotional arguments. And his taste for politics prevents him from staying mum.

"The other environmentalists don't really like him. They know he cares about the truth," said Randal O'Toole, a policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute and fellow Oregon State University forestry school alumnus who calls Stahl his best friend.

Stahl's willingness to split with environmental groups doesn't surprise people who know him. The son of a molecular biologist, Stahl may have gotten his scientific approach -- and his politics, too -- from his father.

Frank Stahl is also a DNA researcher as well as a former colleague of the late Linus Pauling, the biochemist and peace activist who won both a Nobel Prize for chemistry and a Nobel Peace Prize for opposing nuclear weapons.

"Our phone was probably tapped," Andy Stahl joked.

As he tackles his latest fight on wildfires, Stahl isn't making many friends along the way. He's up against a Forest Service wildfire fighting policy that many feel is overly aggressive, and against Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, whose department oversees the Forest Service.

And while congressional Republicans aren't exactly cheering the Forest Service's ever-increasing spending on fires, they say the forest fire problem stems from the government's reluctance to thin more timber from the woods, a notion Stahl dismisses with sarcasm.

"One wonders how forests survived before us," Stahl said.

Diverse career

Stahl's work on forest issues started in college. He studied forestry at Oregon State University, graduating in 1979 and going straight to work for the Forest Service.

Then he took a job as a lobbyist for Associated Oregon Loggers. At the time, logging companies were looking to better understand the field of forest planning, which they saw as a potential public policy threat, Stahl said. Associated Oregon Loggers had contacted Oregon State, which got in touch with Stahl.

The main fight during his time with the loggers, Stahl said, was to block a bill that would have given buyers of federal timber a break on what they owed contract loggers, a bailout the buyers were seeking because of the recession in the early 1980s. Stahl testified against the bill, which didn't pass.

Stahl left the timber industry in 1983 for the National Wildlife Federation, which he said offered him more money to become a staff forester.

There, he caught the attention of the director of the NWF's Washington, D.C., office, Pat Parenteau, who was looking for someone to start a branch at Oregon State, one of the most timber-oriented schools in the country, devoted to forestry and salmon protection. Stahl's background in science and comfort with politics helped make him the right pick for a job that wouldn't be easy, Parenteau said.

"We sort of had the idea that this was going to be dicey, going into a state school," said Parenteau, now a Vermont Law School professor. "We were going up against the timber industry."

While heading that branch, Stahl built a reputation for independence, including ruffling the president-elect of the NWF board of directors, Carl Crouse, by aligning with American Indian tribes -- and recognizing their tribal treaty rights -- on protecting salmon runs, Parenteau said. Crouse was a former fisheries director in Washington state who had supported a ban on off-reservation steelhead fishing by tribes, an argument his department eventually lost in federal court.

The NWF office at Oregon State eventually closed. In 1987, Stahl went to the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, now called Earthjustice, where he helped devise the spotted owl lawsuits that led to the protection of 8 million acres of old-growth forests. He doesn't have any legal training, Stahl said: "It ain't rocket science!"

The lawsuits against the federal government in the 1980s and '90s aimed to halt logging on millions of acres of old-growth forests that are home to the owl, which numbers about 1,200 nesting pairs in Oregon, according to Defenders of Wildlife.

Even there, Stahl said, he wasn't immediately on the good side of environmental groups, some of which supported timber cutting.

He has also fought the Forest Service in defense of employees who shared Stahl's instinct to speak his mind. In 1997, FSEEE helped Mary Dalton, a forestry technician for the Forest Service, win a grievance against the agency for suspending her, then transferring her to another state, after she appealed a timber sale in Alaska. She also sued the agency for banning employees from appealing timber sales -- a ban the Forest Service eventually dropped.

Stahl's independent streak has sparked him to lead more personal battles, as well.

In 2003, he and three other foster parents sued Oregon for cutting the state assistance they'd been promised as adopting parents. Stahl and his ex-wife had adopted their children -- now teenagers -- as fosters at the ages of a year and a half and 4 months.

The lawsuit eventually won a \$1.7 million settlement on behalf of thousands of families.

"It turns out these skills are transferable," Stahl said.

Fire battles

Now Stahl works to promote what he considers a saner approach to the Forest Service's growing battle with forest fires.

Stahl says the Forest Service puts far too much emphasis on stamping them out, consuming around half the agency's annual budget.

That may be a sign, he said, that his fight for the spotted owl worked too well. Deprived of timber sales, the Forest Service has turned to a new mission -- fighting forest fires -- that may do the forests more harm than good, Stahl argues.

Rather than going all-out to stamp out fires, he said, the Forest Service ought to let more of them burn so the woods have a chance to regenerate naturally. He doesn't accept the agency's argument that it needs more money to fight catastrophic wildfires. He says the Forest Service's own numbers prove it.

"That's the big lie," Stahl said of the agency's budget justifications. The amount of burned Forest Service land hasn't veered far from averages, he said, and most of the fire-related loss of houses or other property publicized in news reports has been on land not owned by the Forest Service. "Almost all of those houses were lost on private land," he said.

Stahl has some numbers on his side. Although the total of 10 million acres burned in wildland fires in the United States in 2015 was a record high, the Forest Service alone reported an average year. The 7,056 fires on Forest Service land were below the 10-year average of 7,515, and the 1.9 million acres burned was only slightly more than the 10-year average of 1.6 million acres, according to an annual federal report on wildland fires.

Still, the agency's fire management costs have ballooned from 13 percent of the agency's budget in the 1990s to 56 percent in 2016, the government reported. The agency requested \$3.3 billion for fire management in the fiscal year starting Oct. 1.

The Forest Service did not respond to a request for comment. But the agency has said fires are more frequent and intense, in part because of extended droughts, and threaten homes and other development.

"The frequency and intensity of wildfire, prolonged drought, increased development in areas near forests, and the way that fire suppression is paid for all combine to limit the agency's capacity to realize additional gains in land management and restoration," the agency said in a 2015 news release.

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership supports the agency's request to change how it pays for fire suppression, allowing money to be drawn from an emergency account so the agency doesn't have to transfer ever-increasing funds from other accounts.

"I don't see how you can say this isn't happening or it's a budget gimmick," said the TRCP's director of government relations, Steve Kline. "We can either watch these places go up in smoke, with a big carbon footprint, or we can help forest health and forest economies."

Stahl is also weighing in on another controversy in the forests: the closure of access roads. A memo prepared by House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands staff for a hearing earlier this year said the Forest Service proposes to reduce the number of miles of roads maintained by the agency by almost 5,000 from fiscal 2015.

Rep. Tom McClintock (R-Calif.), chairman of the subcommittee, said that he's received around 500 emails in complaint, and that the Forest Service needs the roads in order to fight fires.

Stahl sees the argument in the reverse. Timber companies recognize that most fires are started by people, rather than lightning or other natural causes, so companies close access roads during dry weather to keep people out, he said. "When the roads get dry, the gates get shut," he said.

So far, Stahl doesn't appear to have the politics on his side for the wildfire debate. But if his experience with the spotted owl taught him anything, it was to be willing to break away from the received wisdom of his elders, said Stahl, who recently turned 60.

"This is ironic because I'm an elder now," he said.