

# FACTS, INFERENCES AND SHAMELESS SPECULATIONS

J. P. Myers

## Soviet Agriculture, Done the American Way



Photographs by J.P. Myers

**M**ARC LIVERMAN OF PORTLAND Audubon helped me see beyond a planetary tragedy I have been struggling to avoid for some time, or for at least as long as it has seemed that Communism is imploding in the east.

You see, I worry about historical preservation, and there were certain aspects of the Soviet government that seemed too bizarre to allow to just fade away. After all, if local roadstands can turn a profit letting gawkers gaze at two-headed heifers, the original shredder used by Fawn Hall, and Neil Bush's transcripts from Personal Finance 101, isn't there some need to enshrine the more unlikely variations on economic planning that emerged from Moscow over the last 80 years?

My chief concern has been Soviet agricultural planning. Here, indeed, is planning of unique (ir)rationality and behemoth impact. Where else would fundamental constraints on plant productivity be ignored in developing projections for expected yields? Where else would maniacal obsessions for production goals ruin entire ecosystems, and even, as in the case of the Aral Sea, destroy not just the ecosystem but the agriculture these goals were aiming to build? Surely a process this capable of running amok on the landscape deserves some eternal monument in the pantheon of human folly.

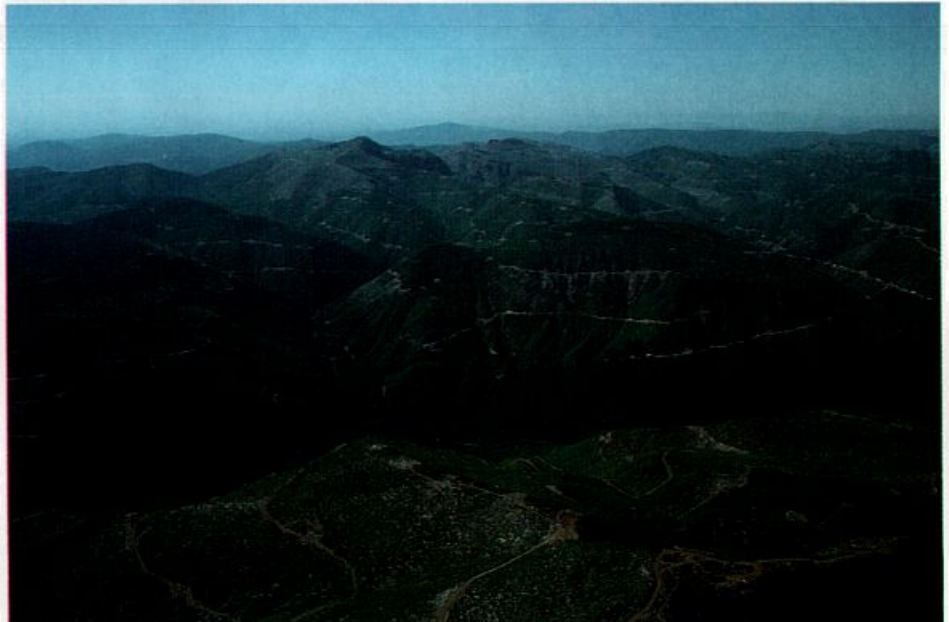
With all the capitalist gurus now headed east toward Moscow bent on

revamping eastern economies, you might think that this style of planning is about to fade away. But fear not, for as Marc Liverman helped me realize last month, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management won't let Soviet Planning disappear. Indeed their efforts in our National Forests and other public lands ensure that the intellectual disciples of Kantorovich and Lysenko will continue to play their game—Soviet agricultural planning, American style!

True, those cotton fields east of the Aral Sea bear faint immediate resem-

field hand in Uzbekistan, the logger in Humptulips, the mill worker in Ashland, or the Spotted Owl along the Mad River, the victory is fleeting. Neither Soviet planners nor the United States (de)foresters have figured out how to evade nature's laws, even if they are remarkably capable of ignoring them for decades.

You need to understand a few facts to appreciate how sovietized our forest industry is. But first, fear not—while it is a plague on the forest and a travesty for ecosystems throughout the Northwest, forestry is now only a small part



*Clear-cutting in the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest north of Mt. Rainier, Washington.*

blance to a second-growth Douglas-fir forest near Roseburg, Oregon. But probe slightly beneath the topography of those mismanaged landscapes and you find one extraordinary parallel in how decisions are made. Political needs win at the expense of biological reality. Unfortunately for the cotton-

of the current economy of Oregon and Washington. The solid wood products industry's share of the gross regional product of Oregon and Washington has fallen now to just 3.5%, even though timber production has risen over the last 10 years to its highest level ever. In fact, while cutting has boomed and

timber jobs have declined, other sectors of the economy have added some 718,900 new jobs since 1980. Anyone who knows the facts and still characterizes this issue as jobs vs. owls would also rent you recycled medicinal leeches to treat AIDS.

Mind you, the sovietization of American forestry is nothing new. In one of the bizarre early twists of the Reagan revolution, timber companies that had purchased timber rights in the late 1970s when it appeared that prices

carries this to an extreme for the forests it manages in southwestern Oregon, called the O&C lands. BLM (the Bureau of Logging and Mining, of Little Minds, of Lysenko's Minions....) runs computer models to establish their cut, which by law is required to be sustainable. They start with what research tells them is the forest's natural growth rate. Then the magic begins. First, they expect to fertilize the reforested plots, and that should allow the new trees to grow faster (Shouldn't it?). Add 4% to

ones worth harvesting, not the countless smaller ones that may be only a few (or 15 or 30) years old. Their 6:1 ratio is at best 1:60 for trees at least a year old, when the reforesting goes very well indeed.

The final step in sovietization took place last year when political needs not only ignored biology but wrenched the decision away from the normal rule of law. An attachment to the 1990 appropriations bill (known as Section 318, the Hatfield-Adams amendment) de-



*Ancient forest (left) and managed Douglas Fir forest (right) from adjacent stands in the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest northeast of Seattle, Washington. The undisturbed old-growth forest contains at least 100 to 150 vascular and nonvascular plant species, while the managed stand has at most 15.*

were soaring into the stratospheric ozone were allowed to sell the very same purchases back to the Forest Service at their inflated purchase price after the market crashed... and then buy them back at the new and lower market value. Ask your congressional delegation about this "timber buy-back" of the early 1980s. Better yet, see if your stockbroker would give you a similar deal on some Eastern Airlines stock you may have bought a few years back.

This idiocy goes deeper still. Consider the way in which each year's permissible cut is determined. In principle, the allowable cut is based upon the ability of the forest to produce new wood. The law requires that the cut be sustainable, that the annual timber yield be balanced by timber growth. In fact National Forests in the Pacific Northwest—your national forests—are being clear-cut at a rate roughly 160% of the natural growth rate.

The Bureau of Land Management

the computer's calculation of allowable cut. Then add another couple of points because they have faith that sometime in the future genetic manipulations should produce trees that grow faster. And add a few more because spraying herbicides and pesticides will make for even more productive growth (ignoring the fact that spraying has been stopped by injunction for almost 10 years). The result is a biologically insane allowable cut that has built a cumulative deficit (more board feet removed than can possibly grow) now upwards of half a billion board feet in this one region of Oregon alone.

But wait, you say, you've read those wonderful industry ads claiming to plant six trees for every one cut down. You've seen the Wyeth-esque paintings of deer frolicking alongside replanted clear-cuts. In fact, of those six trees planted often only one is likely to survive to the end of its first year. And the count of cut trees includes only the

clared that the Forest Service would be required to achieve the cut mandated by Congress notwithstanding any other law. This was a desperate strategy to slither around court injunctions obtained by environmental law suits. Successful in the short-term, whether Section 318 and its successors remain in place depends upon how well-informed the public becomes on this issue and what is at stake.

What is at stake? The ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest stretch northward from California through Oregon, Washington, and Idaho into British Columbia. While they lack the sheer number of plant and animal species found in tropical rainforests, they contain a much greater biomass—as much as ten times the tonnage per acre as the most productive tropical forest. The forests, their wildlife, the plants, the watersheds they shelter, and the soils they generate through biological decay, are irreplaceable parts of the biological

capital that underpins human economic activity in the region.

Exploited mercilessly over the last century at a pace that vastly exceeds deforestation rates in the tropics, the Northwest's cathedral forests are symbols of the developed nations' inability to keep their own ecological houses in order. They now are the focal point of a major struggle pitting short-term economic considerations against the sustainable use of natural resources. The outcome of this struggle will shape the environment of that region for the next several centuries. It will also have significant impacts on policies within the United States that govern how public lands, especially national forests, are managed and how economic and political forces contribute to ecological solutions. And finally, the outcome will influence the ability of American and international conservation efforts to protect forests under siege elsewhere around the world, particularly in tropical areas.

The challenge to win the battle for ancient forests is immense. Obtaining a sustainable approach to forestry in the



*An old-growth stand east of Mt. Rainier. This stand is scheduled to be logged this summer. "The folks in the photograph are Audubon ancient forest activists."*

Pacific Northwest will require changes in Congress, in the courts, and in public agencies. It will affect the course of a regional economy. The forces work-

ing in opposition are large, particularly in terms of the monies at their disposal, over \$10 million for industry organizing in 1988 alone. But a sense of optimism is detectable now among conservationists working on the issue. Even if every two steps forward are followed by one step back, and even while every delay means that many more acres logged, court cases and congressional action keep strengthening the case for ancient forests and the hands of the environmental community. Scientific facts, legal arguments, and increasingly, public opinion, are on the forests' side.

What then, of the need for historical preservation of the economic distortions of Soviet agricultural planning? With all due respect to those that have labored hard in Moscow against the Aral Sea, and to those working in Washington, Oregon, and Washington, D.C. to keep the cut at historic levels, this is one perversity the planet doesn't need. ■

—Director, W. Alton Jones Foundation, 232 E. High St., Charlottesville, VA 22901

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