
Interview: Curt Johnson

The Science of Forest Fire Prevention

Mr. Johnson is the Commissioner of School and Public Lands in South Dakota, and serves as President of the on Western States Land Commissioners. He was interviewed on Sept. 6 by Marjorie Mazel Hecht. The following is an abridged transcript.

EIR: How does South Dakota's land-use and management policy differ from Federal policy?

Johnson: The big difference is that South Dakota, and a lot of the Western states, had land given in trust for a particular purpose—oftentimes, education. And, then you had the Land Grant colleges; that money was given from the Federal government for the support of those particular institutions. So, our mandate is not a multiple-use one, but it's one to make money, to manage the land as a trustee, and to put that money into education.

This is something that's got to last forever, so to speak. And so, we manage accordingly. We're not going to abuse it, but it has to make money.

EIR: How much of your state land is involved in these money-producing activities for the state, and how much money do the lands bring in, in South Dakota?

Johnson: I'd say 99% of this land is either leased out for grazing, or logging, or oil and gas exploration. The income varies. Our state lands, our total school and public lands—because all of our money goes back to the schools—[bring in] about \$12 million a year. Some of that comes from a trust fund.

EIR: And then, what's the Federal policy?

Johnson: The Federal policy on their lands is multiple-use, and making money is an incidental. Now, that may not be in writing, but that's generally the way that it's treated. They don't make money off the Bureau of Land Management grazing areas; these generally are money *losers*. And, the same way with forests.

A lot of people do enjoy the forests, but ours are treated

differently. We still allow certain activities on state land—perhaps hunting or fishing. Take Custer State Park in South Dakota, for example. It's a well-managed forest and grasslands, all in one park. They've done an excellent job, for years. They may have some small, prescribed burns in the forest, but they make sure they don't get fuel overloads, and diseased trees are taken out, broken-down trees are taken out—

EIR: Why don't you explain "fuel overload" for people?

Johnson: Fuel overload can happen in a forest or a grassland. If you didn't graze anything for years, you'd have a lot of dead grass, dead brush, and so on, so, if a fire starts, it's intense. It gets really hot.

Now, in the forest, there could be a lot of downed logs, and other things on the ground. We also use the term "dog hair pines" in a pine forest—these are a lot of little pines, which aren't as big around as, maybe, your wrist, and are growing really thick in the forest. And, if it's never thinned, and if it catches on fire, it just burns with such intensity, that oftentimes, it takes years and years before the trees come back.

EIR: So, on the state lands, you thin the underbrush and small trees.

Johnson: We thin the small trees, because that encourages the bigger trees to grow. If you have too many small trees, they take up too much moisture, and then it stunts the growth of the big trees. You also have to thin trees to make sure that they don't become a big fuel load on the forest floor that's going to cause more damage than it should, if a fire does occur.

EIR: Is it the case that the Federal lands don't get thinned?

Johnson: There are areas where nothing is done—the least-managed areas—and other areas where they do have some forestry practices. Maybe thinning is a part of their practice, but much less than it used to be.

Another part of the problem is—I can speak to the Black Hills forest, for example—that a forest plan can be scientifically looked at, and finally put in place, but oftentimes, ends up in litigation. Almost every forest plan ends up in litigation. And, in my view, the courts are not forest managers, and I don't think you get the best science out of litigation.

EIR: Is this environmentalist groups, that are challenging the forest management plans, because they want areas to remain as wilderness?

Johnson: Yes. They want areas to remain as unlogged, or, they may think that the logging is too severe; they may not like a particular logging pattern.

Or, they may just want to delay something. You know, lawsuits are a way of delaying any kind of action at all. I know, for example, in Montana, on some state land that was put up for logging, they actually got sued by both sides: by the environmentalists, because there was too much, and by



the industry, because they didn't think it was enough! So, sometimes you just can't win.

I think the states are better able to manage, because they don't have to go through this cumbersome process that the Federal government does. And, the states have a different emphasis, too: to make money. They want to grow big trees, because some day, they'll be harvested. And, forestry is a renewable resource, not like mining, which is a one-time thing.

EIR: Does the state contract out to timber companies, to do the thinning and logging?

Johnson: Yes. And, sometimes, if there's a fire, we contract out for salvage.

EIR: South Dakota's Black Hills lost some acres to fire this year, as part of the 6.2 million acres burned throughout the West.

Johnson: Well, a fire—and it actually has still not totally subsided—burned about 83,000 acres. It was started by an arsonist. This is one of those things you can't blame Forest Service practice on: arsonists and hot, dry, windy weather. Part of the area where it started had been logged. So, even though you may place some blame on Forest Service policy, there are things that are just beyond their control—such as lightning.

In this case, I think, the burn was even more severe, because, earlier this year, we'd had a severe wind, and tornadoes that had broken off hundreds and thousands of trees. And, even though they'd started a salvage operation, a lot of that had not commenced, and so, these broken and dead trees added to the intensity of the fire.

EIR: Why have we had so many fires this year?

Johnson: I don't like the "blame game." There's probably plenty of blame to go around. I would like to see us say—when we talk about the fires: "Okay, what would have made this easier to control? What should be done?" Scientifically, let's take a look at it. After we've analyzed it, we should figure out, "What could we have done differently? What could have been better? What practices would have made this easier to take care of, without damaging our property and the environment that we're living in here?" Then we should go from there.

It's too easy for people to cast blame, and then that sticks in the public's mind, before you've even had an analysis of how you might do a better job. It prevents a solution. Because, what they do is, "We're going to take the biggest advantage we can politically, and we don't care who we damage in the process." But we've learned nothing! What do we do? We beat up on people, and then, where's our opportunity to *learn* from this? Maybe we could do a little better job, the next time. Maybe we do more cutting; maybe we do more selective cuttings. Sometimes—and I know an environmentalist would never like to hear this—but sometimes, clear-cutting is the

right thing to do, in certain areas. For wildlife, many times it is the right thing to do.

So, I think we need to *learn* from this, and then, we can see where a policy needs to be adjusted.

EIR: What are your policy recommendations to alleviate the risk factor for fire in the West?

Johnson: I'm a land manager and an elected official. From my perspective, I think you need to have a policy of taking out your dead and dying timber, whether that comes through disease or through wind damage. I think you have to allow a lot of salvage. You do thinning. Even in areas of minimal management, you do some thinning in areas, because you want the other trees not to be starved for water. It's just a good practice.

Because so many people have built homes out in the forest, especially in the Black Hills, using prescribed burns, is tough. There are some places, where you could do it, but you always have a risk of those burns getting out of control. So, in the absence of prescribed burns, you're going to have to do thinning, you're going to have to take out the dead wood, you're going to have to try to reduce that fuel load as much as you can.

EIR: I know this has been opposed in other places by the environmentalist groups, who don't want any human intervention in the forests.

Johnson: That's true. I don't peg myself as an anti-environmentalist, but I think that some of those people, while meaning well, don't understand. Some of them say, "Well, just let nature take care of it." Well, God put the trees and the other animals for us to utilize. I'm not talking about abusing, or anything else. I'm just saying, they're there to utilize, and I think you can still enjoy the forest, immensely—probably even better—if you do some form of management. And, that management doesn't have to be that tremendously invasive.

EIR: What do you see as the role of Congress in this fight?

Johnson: Congress has to blame itself for this bureaucracy that doesn't work very well. When you establish a bureaucracy, whether it's with the Bureau of Land Management or the Forest Service, where you have 10,000 hoops you have to jump through to have every plan approved, sure, it's going to take way longer than it should. You also can't react to emergency situations. The states, when they have a problem, say: "Okay, we can get out a contract to loggers," for example, "to take down broken trees, and salvage," and it doesn't take long to do it. So, the process that would take the states a couple of months, might take them a couple of years. And, then your opportunity is lost, the trees are rotted and nobody wants 'em.

I'd rather see things not managed on a political basis, but on a scientific basis. I think there's good science out there. And, even scientists may have some disagreements, but there's good science, and I think that's how we ought to manage.