

HARD LESSONS: MENDOCINO'S FOREST ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Authors' Note: We are partners in Adams & Goldbard, an organizational and cultural development consulting firm based in Ukiah. Last spring, we were engaged by the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors to help in considering the recommendations on timber harvesting and related matters made by the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC). The Supervisors had appointed timber industry representatives, environmentalists, and public agency representatives to this task force in 1989 and charged them with finding ways to achieve a sustainable forest and forest products industry in Mendocino County. After deliberating for over two years, the FAC was unable to reach a consensus, but a strong majority adopted recommendations for special forest practice rules which were forwarded to the Board late in 1991. A smaller faction of timber industry representatives, calling itself the "minority," issued its own dissenting report in January 1992. The Supervisors attempted to hold meetings to consider the FAC recommendations, but they found themselves unable to keep order and ensure a fair hearing.

We were called in to help create a process through which the Board could examine and debate the merits of the FAC recommendations and decide in a timely fashion whether to modify, adopt, or reject them. A key goal and stipulation was that members of the public should have access to the same information as Supervisors and be able make their views known to the Board.

Toward these ends, we planned and facilitated a four-part process: On May 8th, the Board and FAC met all day at the County Office of Education for a series of presentations and discussions designed to provide an overview of the recommendations; on May 22nd, a second day-long session was held to provide additional information and respond to Board members's questions and concerns; on June 13th, an all-day public hearing was held at the Willits Community Center; and on June 23rd, FAC members made final comments and the Board made its final decision at the Saturday Afternoon Club in Ukiah. All of these meetings were broadcast live over public radio. The two first sessions were videotaped and broadcast over cable access channels throughout the county; videotapes could also be checked out for home viewing from a range of public agencies, libraries, and environmental organizations around the county.

The recommendations for new timber harvest rules were rejected by the Supervisors on a 3-2 vote, with only Liz Henry and Norman de Vall voting yes.

We support the FAC's goals and offer the following analysis in the hope that it will help those who wish to carry forward the effort to sustain Mendocino County's forests as natural, economic, and spiritual resources for many generations to come. ■

KING TIMBER

When we first began to assist the Board of Supervisors in examining and considering the Forest Advisory Committee's recommendations, we were struck by the unusually stark way in which the controversy exposed power relations in Mendocino County.

It quickly became obvious that the timber industry could be so matter-of-fact in using its power in part because it is the corporate sector in Mendocino County, plain and simple. The process of negotiation and compromise that might complicate or obscure power relations in another region with a more varied corporate sector (where various manufacturing and agricultural interests must work together, each sacrificing some of its own agenda and moderating some of its desires in favor of a perceived joint interest) is absent here. The result has been a naked and unadorned use of corporate power by a single dominant industry.

People on all sides of the timber issue told us, "In Mendocino County, timber is king." Throughout our involvement in the FAC process, the timber corporations threw their weight around as if there was no doubt of the truth of this assertion. Their representatives acted as if they were entitled to whatever they wanted, displaying deeply injured feelings when they didn't immediately get their way.

For instance, no matter how much time they were given on the agendas of the public meetings we facilitated, they responded as if they hadn't been given a fair chance to state their case. They continued this stance even after they were unable to come up with enough substance to fill the time allotted at the first public meeting to put their case forward.

During the process, we thought a lot about the meaning of this dissonance. On the one hand, members of the FAC timber industry "minority" could have been responding, rather genuinely, to the threat of loss of their "king" status. We can imagine, for instance, that a husband whose wife had always waited on him hand and foot would feel aggrieved if she began insisting it was time for him to do his share of the housework. And certainly a king would feel victimized if his subjects decided to talk about limiting his power. On the other hand, it could have been a conscious tactic: if you consistently act like a victim, you might convince people that you actually have been injured. Whether conscious or not, the industrial timber people on the FAC used this tactic very effectively, positioning themselves as the "minority," complaining at every opportunity that they were not strong enough to defend themselves against their powerful environmentalist enemies. They characterized themselves as struggling individuals,

and wherever possible, little guys, cynically, successfully—and ironically—manipulating widespread anti-corporate feeling to their own advantage. As the Mendocino Environmental Center's Gary Ball has pointed out, in this as in other tactical choices, they followed the advice given to resource-based industries by the "wise use" movement supported by extractive industries around the country, advice which was deployed to great effect by the industrial timber operators of Mendocino County.

Our hunch is that both explanations for this stance are true. A real feeling of being injured was fortuitously present to lend punch and authenticity to a "wise use" approach adopted for strategic reasons.

Having positioned themselves as victims in the FAC process, and trading on their "king" status in the county, the industrial timber interests were prepared to use any means necessary to retain their monarchy.

Certainly, they were willing to manipulate data or make absurd assertions about its meaning in order to create support for themselves. For instance, they procrastinated in providing data on timber company inventories and targets to the economists working with the FAC, then at the last minute offered inflated figures without any substantiation other than their own words, which then skewed the

economists' computer models to give the false impression that leaving the industry alone would have the same long-term impact on the forests as adopting the new, more restrictive rules proposed by the majority.

Their line on jobs provides another illustration: although there has been a steady decline in local timber industry jobs for decades (since long before environmental regulation affected the industry), due in part to automation and in part to declining stocks of merchantable timber available to harvest, timber industry representatives on the FAC asserted again and again that environmental activism and regulation were the primary source of job losses. Industry leaders were notably successful in putting this point across by the simple expedient of using workers to do it for them; they dispatched carloads of workers and their families, during the work day, to FAC meetings to frame the argument as "jobs vs. the environment."

We were impressed with several Supervisors' willingness to be convinced by this approach, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. The timber companies were shrewd in opting to play for emotional appeal and simply ignore the data; the results justified their confidence that a majority of elected officials would do likewise.

Industry representatives were also willing to play turnabout, misrepresenting or withholding their own positions when they felt it was advantageous to defer their opposition for a more opportune moment. In the course of our work on this project, we asked a timber company representative why he and his colleagues had gone along with proposed definitions of "sustained yield" and other key terms when these were put forward by other FAC members, and then charged many months later (in the "minority report" opposing FAC recommendations) that these definitions were adopted without regard for their objections. He told us, "I went along with the decision so we could keep things moving. We disagreed, but it wasn't worth the quibble. We figured we could always manipulate the process later."

This same tactic was practiced on a larger scale, and with great success, in the decision to create a "minority report." The timber industry representatives on the FAC stuck it out through the entire two-and-one-half years of close deliberation on minutely detailed proposals, refusing to propose competing goals, definitions, timetables, or plans, steadily moving compromises in their own direction by their intransigence and determination.

By doing this, the timber industry interests positioned themselves as the arbiters, able to accept or reject proposals, casting the other FAC members as those who propose, beseech, and entreat. In purely strategic terms, it was a stroke of genius to play the arbiter role throughout the grueling, drawn-out process of developing recommendations, then to pull out at the last moment and issue a "minority report" insisting that the recommendations represented not a compromise, but an extreme-left position, and that their views were not reflected but simply omitted from the process. In ethical terms, of course, it was a cynical betrayal of the FAC's working assumption of fair play and a cynical attempt to present a false and misleading picture of the real power dynamics to the Board of Supervisors and the general public.

Finally, it was clever of the industrial timber interests to adopt, to quite a significant extent, the language of environmentalism and humanism. This, too, is one of the "wise use" tactics, and it worked very well in this situation. So many of the key words—"stewardship" comes to mind—are simply vague, feel-good signifiers with no practical, agreed-upon meaning. The person who uses this rubric is putting out a simple message: "I am a good guy, I want to take care of things." When evidence of industry malfeasance was raised by FAC members questioning the timber companies' commitment to real stewardship, representatives of the industrial timber interests responded by looking contrite and directing a regretful nod to "the bad old days," sometimes only a year or two earlier, when, it was suggested, less enlightened managers had held sway.

The impression was thus given that industry practices have improved, without any concrete evidence being offered, without even an attempt to define terms or criteria for improvement. The most amazing moment of this kind was FAC member Mark Edwards' decision to sum up his testimony at the second public meeting by quoting Vaclav Havel to the effect that "We must see the pluralism of the world and not bind it by seeking common denominators or reducing everything to a *single common equation*..." With this stroke, he asserted his alliance with the forces of humanism and diversity in the world, and implicitly, against the giant factory of state communism, based on the principle that one size fits all, represented by the "single common equation" of "percentage of inventory" (POI), the standard of harvest volume put forward in the FAC majority's

recommendations.

On specific content, the "minority" presentations were extremely weak. Members of the "minority" could not agree on a common platform. In fact, the only position they held in common was opposition to any new regulation. To advance this position they threw everything but the kitchen sink onto the table: They advocated letting the State do it, a tremendous irony in that they also represented themselves as being against intrusion of public regulators into private commerce and the State into local affairs, and were at the same time lobbying the California Department of Forestry against the adoption of new state-level rules. They put out half a dozen suggestions for competing approaches to timber harvest regulation, sketching in only the barest outlines and refusing to advocate any of them, creating the impression that there are lots of good ideas out there which just need a little more study and preparation. And they registered scattershot objections to specific elements of the FAC recommendations, always suggesting that many more objections could be made if only they were given adequate time.

During the Board's public meeting process, many of the remaining FAC members took heart from the weakness of the specific "minority" critiques and proposals. But as we suggest below, this was a false hope. Because the "minority" strategy was strong, and focused on creating doubt and confusion, the flaccidity and feebleness of their specific presentations ended up being beside the point.

TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

Timber industry representatives on the FAC were backed by all the resources of the county's corporate sector; each acted as point-person for an apparatus of managers and strategists. In contrast to the corporate backing available to the "minority," environmentalists on the Committee acted as individuals, able to marshal only their own resources for the project; every chart, graph, or report represented contributions of members' own time and money. Every strategic choice represented members' own efforts to put their heads together and plan wisely. Several members were veteran activists, who had been deeply involved in efforts to limit timber harvesting by other means, including ballot initiatives, monitoring and protesting of timber harvest plans, and lawsuits. The impression we gained from our early talks with some of these members is that they had agreed to participate in the FAC in the spirit

of a last-ditch effort, one more attempt to work within a system which had been largely unyielding in the past. Their prior experience gave environmentalists a long view of the process; they saw it in the context of a protracted political struggle. But ironically, this long view may have led to a tactical error.

In the past, environmentalists have been condemned by more conservative forces for excessive emotionalism, concentrating on “warm” appeals to love of nature, Mother Earth, and natural values over what is perceived as the cultural myopia of resource-gobbling societies. Those representing environmental interests on the FAC, aware of this history, and confident that the plain facts of the forest situation would support their arguments, made a strategic decision about how to proceed. According to what we learned through our early talks with FAC members and what we observed in the process, FAC environmentalists decided to adopt a “cool” approach, focusing on hard data to prove the case for timber harvest rules rather than attempting to convince on moral, ethical, emotional, or political grounds.

When we entered the process last spring, some months after the FAC recommendations and opposing “minority report” had been submitted, environmental interests were wavering about how to respond to the “minority” strategy. Some felt it would be best to take what was seen as the high road, sticking with a cool, scientific approach, and refuting the “minority” on the face of its data, without calling particular attention to the pattern of manipulation which had marked the timber industry’s participation, and without crying “foul!” at the “minority’s” attempt to recast the compromise recommendations as an environmentalist plot, ramrodded through without full consideration of the options. Others felt the “minority” tactics should be condemned. In the event, a middle way was adopted. Advocates of the FAC recommendations presented them to the Supervisors in such a way as to highlight the compromises made at each point—what the environmentalists had given up and what the industry had given up—in order to arrive at each recommendation. But they chose not to give much attention to exposing the industrial opposition plan *per se*, for example, which might have been done by presenting a clear-cut description of the “minority” strategy and suggesting how and why it might have been developed.

Environmental interests presented the data backing the FAC recommendations with great skill and command, best exem-

plified by the late Eric Swanson’s masterful use of pennies to represent trees in a funny, pointed, and elegantly simple explanation of the principle of “percentage of inventory.” There is no question that this material had force with members of the public who followed the process. We have heard from quite a few people who described themselves as becoming truly conversant with the issue and its importance as a result of viewing this process on television. So the strategy fulfilled its goal of making much of this highly technical material accessible. But it did not succeed in convincing the Board of Supervisors.

In essence, then, the “minority” and environmentalist approaches to the process of deciding on the FAC recommendations had opposite strengths and weaknesses. The “minority” adopted a shrewd, manipulative, and ruthless strategy and invested very little in backing it up with specifics; the environmentalists invested a great deal in developing strong, defensible, and comprehensive specific proposals, but did so within a weak strategy that relied on little more than faith in the power of the truth.

POLITICAL REALITY CHECK

Given the extreme imbalance of forces—a prosperous, unified corporate sector with ample resources to compensate its allies versus a depleted, demoralized environmental sector functioning on volunteer energy and scrounged resources—it is not clear that any other approach would have succeeded either. Although we see the “cool” approach as a tactical error, leaving too much important ground to timber industry interests, and although different approaches might have had more force in mobilizing the public, they probably could not have carried the Board.

In retrospect, the entire FAC enterprise may have served largely to postpone the inevitable, given the current Supervisorial line-up. In spring 1989, when the FAC idea was proposed, many people were surprised that all five Supervisors embraced it. There is some evidence that they reached this rare unanimous agreement for one primary reason: to deflect to another group (and thus also postpone) the task of dealing with the hot-potato issue of limiting timber harvesting, since significant opposition was likely to greet any decision, be it for or against limitations. The Supervisors undoubtedly also shared a vague desire to find common ground on the forests; perhaps the freshness of the FAC idea stimulated their hopes enough to overshadow

their differences while they cast their votes on that April day. And we shouldn’t forget that the proposal to create the FAC was made at the end of the Reagan era, when confrontational politics were at a low ebb, and when everyone was talking about “win-win” solutions, through which advocates of all sides of an issue could presumably reach a compromise which satisfied everyone.

In retrospect, it was absurd to imagine that such a solution might have been found between such strongly opposed interests with such clearly conflicting values. Industrial timber in Mendocino County, having depleted its own lands through over-harvesting, was aiming to minimize regulation and oversight and enable maximum access to the holdings of non-industrial private timber owners and to public forestlands, so that their sawmills could be kept active and sales of lumber and profits could be kept at high levels for as long as they last. The environmental sector, convinced that quick action is essential to even a partial rescue of the forest, aimed to drastically minimize timber harvesting to allow for an increase in inventory over an extended period of time, in order to arrive at a healthy, diverse forest which produces timber on a sustained basis, without depletion.

The question then arises whether it was wise, in retrospect, for environmentalists to engage with the timber industry in a drawn-out process which had as its explicit goal reconciling these diametrically opposed interests. Aside from whatever benefit was gained in informing and educating members of the public (and that remains to be seen), for the environmentalists, the process amounted to being held captive for an extended period, with the energy of critically important leaders and experts absorbed in a frustrating poker game over minutiae. Although the FAC was initiated by environmentalists, who brought the idea to the Board of Supervisors, they soon became stuck in a defensive posture as their opponents—the “minority”—set the rules of play: environmentalists would propose, timber industry representatives would dispose, stalling for time and feeling no obligation to support the compromise recommendations they helped to craft.

We are not suggesting that all this could have been known in 1989. It seems quite clear that the environmentalists who joined the FAC did so out of genuine hope, and in a good-faith effort to deal honestly with opponents and reach a compromise predicated on the knowledge that all parties would benefit in the long run from a sustainable

forest. The question is not whether people should castigate themselves for their past decisions, but how this experience should guide future choices.

In our view, two key features of current political reality must be understood to glean the fullest possible lesson from this experience.

First, it should be noted that in this situation, the goals of the two sides were neither parallel nor equal. The environmental interests would only win their battle if a large number of new initiatives were adopted—policies, rules, fees, *etc.* In contrast, the timber industry would win if nothing happened at all: maintaining the status quo is itself a victory for the industry. In practice, this meant that the environmentalists' task was to study, formulate, and propose pages and pages of new regulations and rationales for them, but all the industrial interests had to do was raise enough doubt about the wisdom of adopting those proposals to prevent their going forward. They did not actually have to refute the proposals, and indeed, as pointed out earlier, they made no systematic effort to do so. All they had to do was confuse the issue enough to encourage a "no" vote on the grounds that too many questions remained to justify a "yes."

This problem was compounded by the FAC majority decision to approach the challenge of timber harvest limitations through a complicated package of rules requiring new forms of monitoring and reporting by timber owners. This is a dilemma affecting not only FAC members but progressive forces in general in this country: often, we find ourselves in the position of proposing or defending potentially clumsy, intrusive, and bureaucratic interventions in the name of equity and justice; while our opposition is able to speak in terms of human freedom, minimizing intrusions on private life and commerce, and diversity—all immensely appealing values. It is impossible to say whether there might be an approach to saving the forests which could have avoided this pitfall. If other approaches are possible, they have not yet been developed. But the problem of developing them is certainly a worthy one, if only because engaging with it holds out some hope that environmentalists and other progressives might not always be backed into fighting hard for initiatives they themselves find deeply flawed.

Second, there was no reason to expect that most of the Supervisors would consider the case on its merits, and no evidence to suggest that they actually did so. As she publicly

proclaimed before the final vote was cast, Marilyn Butcher's participation was a foregone conclusion, scripted by the industrial timber operators and their attorneys. The revealing moment when Nelson Redding took Eric Swanson to task after environmentalists' articulate presentations on May 8th sticks out in our minds: "You *have* some good ideas in here," he said, but also advised, "It'd be nice if you'd kind of change the heading of your 'environmental' members, because it sort of sends out a message... When you talk about 'environmental' you think about tree-spikers, Redwood Summer and all *those* things that you're *against*.... Why don't you use some other name?" Jim Eddie lacked the strong political values or sense of responsibility to protect the commonwealth which might have enabled him to resist the entreaties of "wise use" devotees who sent him pictures of their families and letters from their children pleading with him not to take away Daddy's job. Norman de Vall was predictably involved with his own eloquence and individual trees (metaphorically speaking) rather than the forest, focusing on specific details of the proposed rules rather than the larger question of how to advance the recommendations as a whole. In the end, his "yes" vote was cast in a manner only slightly less damaging than if it had been a "no," and his faith in his own subsequent ability to negotiate a workable compromise where better-informed and clearer-thinking people had failed was discredited when his effort to craft a post-June 23rd compromise with Jim Eddie sank under its own weight. Liz Henry was the only Supervisor who fulfilled all the requirements of a decent public official: displaying command of the material, asking intelligent questions, and allowing her views to be shaped by the answers.

The make-up of the Board and the ignorance and poor policy-making skills of most of its members remind us of the puppet government of a colonial nation. It is sobering to realize that the largest single contribution received by pro-timber industry candidates in the Supervisorial primary amounted to \$1,500 from Louisiana-Pacific, hardly enough money to speak in terms of being "bought off." This is clearly a case of public officials who have come to see their own interests and the interests of the corporate sector as identical without even being well-paid for the favor. We saw no evidence that any of the Supervisors, save Liz Henry, understood themselves as being accountable to constituents who happened to be in favor

of limitations on timber harvesting. The rest seemed to be squarely focused on what the corporate sector would be likely to accept, and their focus never wavered. Without real respect for the public interest in their deliberations, we despair of finding solutions to pressing environmental concerns, however urgent, in this public arena.

Electing competent, principled, and accountable local officials is essential. We hope Seiji Sugawara and Liz Henry have succeeded in mobilizing voters. But if they fail to do so and lose to their opponents in November (and even if they do succeed in winning these seats), it will be crucial to find candidates for those seats which will be up at subsequent elections who fully understand the challenges ahead.

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE

As we see it, there are three main constituencies for the timber issue in Mendocino County.

Timber operators and their employees form one. While a number of non-industrial owners have sided with the goal of a sustainable forest, the industrial operators have succeeded thus far in blaming environmentalists for the decline in jobs in the industry, focusing attention away from their own export of jobs and infrastructure, and scapegoating the vocal, local opposition. There is no reason to predict that this tactic will falter anytime soon, though a concerted effort to expose corporate abuses of power and trust might have an impact on some timber workers, especially in light of inevitable future decisions by the corporate sector to cut its losses at workers' expense.

Committed environmental activists constitute another constituency. Thus far, most discussions of timber issues in Mendocino County have been highly technical. The core of activists comprises people who have taken the time and trouble to inform themselves sufficiently to enter into the discussion. In addition to highly-informed experts who have devoted themselves to protesting THPs, filing lawsuits, and proposing referenda, another circle has focused on direct action, feeling deeply skeptical of the efficacy of other means of opposing timber interests. These differences in approach have led to hotly-contested debates, with one side charging that those who are attempting to work through the system are misguided sell-outs, and the other side charging that a confrontation-focused politics inflames and strengthens the opposition while doing very little to attract broad public support.

The third, largest, and most important constituency comprises those in the middle: residents of the county who have not chosen to make timber issues a special focus of their lives, but who will be affected, even if only indirectly, by the outcome. These people have not been blinded by immediate economic self-interest and corporate manipulation into overlooking timber industry abuses; but neither are they passionate enough about the forest to ante up the substantial investment of time and energy needed to get into the environmentalists' arena as it is now constituted. These people — and we see ourselves as falling into this category — must be brought into the circle if the stranglehold of the corporate sector is to be broken. We think that several points need to be considered by those devising strategies to involve and mobilize this key constituency.

The primacy of economic issues is one point that comes to mind: while the environment is seen as an isolated, special-interest issue in this country right now, the economy is not. After a dozen years of trickle-down economics, people seem ready to question

the role of the corporate sector in our political life: Why have the interests of these wealthy, powerful entities been allowed to dominate the public sector? What damage have they done? How do we get them under control? The environmental movement can mobilize a larger constituency if it demonstrates how working for environmental balance also addresses these questions, how exposing and containing the corporate sector is integral to protecting the environment, and how respecting the environment can contribute to our long-term economic well-being.

A second point is the need for a concerted, carefully-planned approach, so that the environmental message strikes a clear, true note rather than sounding like a cacophony of discordant voices. We are not suggesting that disagreement should be stifled, but that common interests need to be defined and pursued. As the corporations have demonstrated, to prevail, people must put their heads together to arrive at an overarching strategy that recognizes the formidable nature of the opposition and the need for a comprehensive plan.

A third point worthy of consideration is the need for language and forms of presen-

tation that invite people's attention, speak to their concerns, and link them together without requiring them to become experts in arcane and technical subjects. If concern for the environment is to stop being seen as a special interest, there must be ways in for ordinary people, engaged in the ordinary pursuits of work, family, and social involvement, however they are defined. Finding these ways will require a counter-effort to rescue concern for the environment from the so-far successful corporate campaign to associate environmentalists with extremism, as demonstrated by Supervisor Redding's remarks quoted above.

Mendocino County provides a microcosm of the national and international contest now being waged between corporatism and democratic populism. The story of the FAC is unfolding all over the world. Whatever happens to refocus this picture and bring democratic forces to the ascendancy needs to happen around the globe as well, including right here in our own backyard. We hope our small attempt to learn from one such experience will stimulate others to consider how such a change might come to pass. ■