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Rural Communities in an Urban Society and Global Economy

Michael Preston

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**RURAL COMMUNITIES IN AN URBAN SOCIETY
AND GLOBAL ECONOMY**

Michael Preston

Associate Director, Office of Community Services, Fort Lewis College
Coordinator, Montezuma County Federal Lands Program
Coordinator, Community-Public Land Partnership
Southwest Colorado

**THE NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT
IN A CHANGING SOCIETY 1976-1996**

**HOW WELL HAS IT WORKED IN THE PAST 20 YEARS?
WILL IT WORK IN THE 21ST CENTURY?**

September 16-19, 1996

Natural Resources Law Center
University of Colorado
School of Law
Boulder, Colorado

“Rural Communities in an Urban Society and Global Economy”

Michael Preston, Natural Resources Law Center, September 17, 1996

- I. I will focus on Southwest Colorado, which is typical of much of the scenic rural west.
 - A. Personal Perspective. Changes I've seen, in the 30 years since I left urban society to move my family to the Animas Valley, North of Durango. The neighboring dairy farm where we hiked is now a gated community. The Montezuma Valley (in the Cortez area), where I now live, shows signs of the same transition.
 - B. Historical Perspective. The history of Southwest Colorado is typical of the scenic rural west. Rich in both oral and written history.
 - C. Professional Perspective. Left the Valley to see that what happened, in the Animas Valley, doesn't get repeated throughout the rural west. 20 years in the trenches as a rural planner and community developer. Currently working on a County Comprehensive Plan, working with the Ponderosa Pine [forest restoration] Partnership, and with the Forest Service on a community-based approach to revising the San Juan Forest Plan.

- II. I spoke at the Law Center two years ago on the growing tension between the “traditional west” and the “new west.” Today I will talk about the need to reconcile this tension and the potential role of NFMA in this process. I'll begin by addressing the component parts of my topic.
 - A. The Global Economy. Long standing influence in Southwest Colorado.
 - 1. Europeans settled in search of gold, the oldest global commodity.
 - 2. Discovery of oil, gas, uranium touched off a boom in the 50s and 60s that brought in global energy corporations. Streets got paved, schools got built.

3. Global strategic dimension: as a uranium supplier, and in response to the OPEC energy embargo of the 70s, and the resulting energy boom of the early 1980s.
 4. Global influences in the 90s more related to the "footloose" nature of the information age economy.
- B. Rural Communities. In spite of the impact of globally driven boom and bust cycles, it was the relationship between people and the renewable resources that allowed communities to persist.
1. People raised crops, livestock and harvested timber; but the area was too isolated, rugged and lacking in infrastructure for stable links to global and national economies.
 2. Dealt with economic marginality by eating what they raised, building with what they cut, and trading goods with each other until the next boom came along.
 3. While most mining towns withered (some to be reborn as ski towns) the Valley towns persisted based on renewable resources.
 4. The key to human settlement has been water development, beginning with pick and shovel, and peaking with Bureau of Reclamation Projects. Many Tribes are still waiting.
 5. Rural western landscape patterns: small towns grew up around sawmills and ag support businesses, surrounded by irrigated valleys, surrounded by natural (mostly public) lands.
- C. Urban Society. When I was a child in the 50s, Los Angeles County was the largest agricultural producing county in the Nation. We lived in the suburbs to try get back to some of the openness, greenness and security of rural roots that were just one generation back. Farms and orchards, that the suburbs were cut out of, were all but gone by the late sixties. Transportation networks dominate the landscape.
- D. We grew up visiting rural grandparents, and vacationing in National Parks and National Forests.

- E. Southwest Colorado, like many rural places in the West, combined the best of all worlds: small towns, agrarian valleys, and vast natural lands.
- F. We came as "tourists" and beginning in the 1970s, growing numbers of us stayed, often supported by economic opportunities created by tourism and population growth.

III. The Traditional West meets the New West.

- A. For 17 years we have started any exploration of the future by asking community people variations on two simple questions: What do you want to keep? and What do you want to change? Through boom and bust, both natives and newcomers overwhelmingly agree:
 - 1. Keep: the beauty and openness of natural and agricultural landscapes, and keep the friendly, rural, small town culture.
 - 2. Change: better paying jobs and economic opportunities so our children can stay in the community.
- B. Some urban migrants come to isolate themselves with wealth (gated communities), and some come to isolate themselves with paranoia ("freemen" types). But most people come searching for roots that involve both rural culture and rural landscapes.
- C. Understanding this connection between traditional culture, traditional economies and traditional landscapes is the key to the future of the rural west. I have two key messages:
 - 1. If we destroy the cultural and economic roots of our rural communities, we will transform the surrounding landscapes in a ways that will undermine the very qualities that have attracted us to these places.
 - 2. It is rural cultural and economic roots that are the most threatened, endangered and irretrievable elements of the rural ecosystem.

IV. Communities are a vital part of these ecosystems.

A. To truly take an ecosystem approach to the health of our forests, we must understand the cultural, economic and ecological relationships that sustain these landscapes.

1. When we look at cows on the forest, we must also see the stock ponds that have supported expanded wildlife, and the ranches where wildlife winter. We must make sure that in improving one component of the ecosystem we are not killing other equally vital components.
2. When we think about back country vacations, we must think about what sustains the towns where the people live who pump the gas, flip the burgers, and fight the fires. We must think of the loggers that built the roads that get us into the woods and the volunteer search and rescue volunteers that are standing by if we get in trouble.
3. If we enjoy the beauty of these landscapes, we must be aware that they have been shaped and cared for by generations of hard work and financial risk.

B. What we have come to call “community stewardship” cuts both ways:

1. Communities of place should be appreciated for shaping, and caring for, landscapes that have become national treasures.
2. Public lands belong to the nation, and local communities have a responsibility to own up to, and contribute to healing of, past or present degradation.
3. Protecting and restoring western landscapes requires a combination of native knowledge and science, as well as local and national will.

- C. The Ponderosa Pine Partnership in Southwest Colorado has brought together local, state, and federal government, loggers, scientists, educators, environmentalists and landowners to work towards restoring the health of Ponderosa Pine Forests.
1. Scientists are researching and monitoring the “range of natural variability” to formulate ecological prescriptions for thinning and the re-introduction of fire.
 2. Foresters are laying out ecologically based harvests on federal and private land.
 3. Loggers are thinning pilot sites to ecological prescriptions.
 4. Natural resource specialists are looking for sustainable markets for small diameter pine, and evaluating production costs and pricing.
 5. Environmentalists are monitoring results and moving their advocacy from stick to carrot.
 6. Timber industry associations are educating their members about opportunities for an ecologically based wood products industry.
 7. Land managers are struggling with the legal, administrative and budgetary obstacles that lie in the path of adaptive and collaborative efforts.
 8. County Commissioners have played a major role in initiating the project, and bringing the partners together.
- D. The vision of the Ponderosa Pine Partnership: Restoration of a natural open pine forest composition, reduced risk of beetle epidemics and wildfires, reintroduction of a natural fire cycle, increased plant diversity and wildlife habitat, improved forage for game and livestock, a sustainable timber industry, family wage jobs in a time of economic displacement, a bridge between the traditional west and the new west, community and ecological sustainability.

E. This vision is much larger than what the Ponderosa Pine Forest Partnership can accomplish alone. Many of the partners have joined in the community-based effort to revise the San Juan Forest Plan.

V. Principles for a community-base approach to the San Juan Forest Plan Revision, and what can be learned about the National Forest Management Act.

A. Problem. Rural communities thrive on informal communication, and concrete problem solving efforts. Forest Planning efforts have tended to be extremely formal and abstract.

B. Strategy. Form diverse "Community Study Groups" on each Ranger District and facilitate a thorough exploration of the community-public land relationship in its economic, social, and ecological dimensions. Use the groups to formulate a community vision, frame resource management issues from a community perspective, and educate each other. Ground all issues in the field. Tap into and build upon all the relationships and knowledge gained from the Ponderosa Pine Partnership, and numerous other "home grown" initiatives.

C. Problem. The Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA)

D. Strategy. Let everyone who applied, join the study groups. Open up every other conceivable avenue of input. Bring input from other sources into the study groups, and widely circulate study group input. Make it clear that the study groups are not being asked to reach consensus, and that all decisions will be made by the Forest Service. Charge the groups to make sure that the social, economic and cultural information that the Forest Service will apply to decision making is just as thorough as the biological inventories.

E. Problem. Mistrust between "communities of place" and "communities of interest."

F. Strategy. Make it clear that these groups are going to have to work with each other to get anything positive going on the land and in the

community. Count on local study group members who have regional and national ties to bridge with their respective associations.

G. Problem. Ingrained ideology.

H. Strategy. Consider every issue, openly, in light of both science and human values. Maximize opportunities for informal communication and problem solving.

I. Problem. This level of public involvement is time consuming and expensive.

J. Strategy. Imagine a Forest Plan with a vision that is clear enough and inclusive enough that it spawns far more in the way of cooperation and support for management decisions than in appeals.

VI. Does the National Forest Management Act need to be changed? We won't really know until we pull together and learn to make better use of its mechanisms as agencies, as communities of interest and as communities of place. We can only gauge success by progress on the land and in communities.