

Oral History 370-04

U.S. Forest Service Ecosystem Management Oral History

Interviewer: Rick Freeman

Interviewee: Dale Robertson (via telephone)

June 25,1997

My name is Rick Freeman; the follow interview is with Dale Robertson, ex-Forest Service Chief. The date is Wednesday, June 25th; the time is 2:00 mountain time.

Freeman: My first question is, in 1991, what did New Forestry meant to you - before you even signed the memo?

Robertson: (Tape not recording) [A reference to Jerry Franklin, author of New Forestry, professor at University of Washington, regarding] "what his thinking was and his experience. I had working with Jerry back earlier in my career when I was the supervisor of the Siuslaw National Forest - he was over in Eugene - so, Jerry and I kind of went back a long ways.. .so my idea of New Forestry was pretty much shaped by [him] and what he was coming up with. And that was, in a lot of way, old forestry; you know, rather than clear cut, burn, and plant, we would.. .get away from clear cutting, get into partial cutting, leave more of the various niches of the ecosystem that we needed to maintain and try to maintain the elements of the ecosystem over a landscape, over a period of time.. .and that was.. .the New Forestry as Jerry developed it.

Freeman: In early 1991, when you were putting the New Perspectives program together, what did "New Perspectives" mean to you?

Robertson: I didn't come up with that term. I remember some of my staff didn't like New Forestry. We were facing some Congressional hearing in Congress that I had to testify about something... I don't even remember the topic - I guess it was about what we were going about New Forestry and that sort of thing. So, my staff, really working on the testimony, came up with this word "New Perspectives." I don't know if I would have come up with it, but I was the one

who had to announce it, because I had to go to the Congressional hearing and talk about a new program, and new initiative, and it was "New Perspectives" - a new perspective. Basically what it meant was a broader look at forestry. Again, we weren't in the Ecosystem Management yet, but it was a new perspective looking at, first, the whole spectrum of values of a forest that we needed to maintain over time; and then the other aspect was the looking at the broader area, you know, and they came up with the landscape area as opposed to a smaller area. So, again it was "New Perspectives"... was just kind of a label that we pretty much put on Jerry Franklin's work - it was probably modified as it came through the management process - to reflect that this is something new. It's a broader perspective both geographically as well as the spectrum of values we were trying to perpetuate through time.

Freeman: What would you have called it?

Robertson: Well, I can remember the staff came in for my testimony and briefed me and I saw this term, "New Perspectives," and I asked them, now tell me what that means. Incidentally Rick, we're talking several years ago so the time frames may be kind of faulty. Over years it may be a little faulty. I remember they explained it to me kind of like I just explained it to you. I remember there was resistance in the Forest Service to the term New Forestry, and it was kind of a substitute for that. And so it was kind of a new label but still talking about the same thing. So you asked me what I would call it. I remember saying in the meeting, "Well, I don't particularly relate to New Perspectives but I relate to what you're trying to portray." And they asked me the same questions, "Do you have a better term?" and I said "no." I didn't have a better term. So I think New Perspectives was kind of.. I was having to go to Congress to testify, it was where we kind of coined the term, and you know there's something new in the Forest Service, so it was kind of a more compatible, political term to describe what Franklin was calling New Forestry. So I just didn't have a better term and we were facing a deadline of about 24 hours. I said well, unless I can come up with a better term we'll just go with it.

Freeman: Where did the resistance come from? Now you said there was resistance?

Robertson: Not to the substance of New Forestry but to the term "New Forestry." In fact, I had people telling me it was old forestry - that in a lot of ways, these clear cuts look under old forestry - which was partial cut leaving..in old forestry they left inferior trees, it wasn't a clear

cut and so there was.. a lot of people said "well, that's kind of the way we did it in the 1950s." And even Jerry Franklin said, "well, yeah we're kind of going back to the 1950s." So the New Forestry just, it didn't strike a responsive chord in the minds of a lot of people in what we were talking about. I don't know if there was any great resistance; they just didn't like the label.

Freeman: Did anybody perceive it as a threat in any way, or was it pretty well accepted then.. .or quite a bit of diversity [in the reaction]?

Robertson: No, once we adopted New Perspectives, I thin knew forestry kid of passed out of - the term new forestry, and I'm not talking about the substance - the term just kind of went by the way side. I don't even know if Jerry Franklin continued to use that term or not after we came up with a new term. It was all party of the evolution.

Freeman: In terms of the New Perspectives program that was authorized in early 1991, and you authorized that, is that right?

Robertson: Yeah.

Freeman: Why in your mind, did that.. .and you've alluded to this a little bit, but why in your mind did you authorize that? Why was that important?

Robertson: Well, again my memory may not be 100% correct but it seems like we encouraged that on a pilot project. We were experimenting with thing in different ecosystems. So, as I recall, New Perspectives was kind of the freedom and the encouragement of field people to work with their ecosystems to try out different thing - pilot tests, different silvicultural practices - to basically accomplish what we were talking about under New Perspectives. To me there were kind of three driving forces.. .demanding change. First of all was new scientific knowledge. We needed to take a broader view of the forest in terms of values and in terms of geographic areas. Second, the Endangered Species Act was really breathing down out neck and.. .we were losing court cases..we were kind of getting cornered with the Endangered Species Act and losing out flexibility to manage the land. Then I think the endangered species also - the listing of endangered species - reflected that there was some things we weren't doing right out there, if we wanted to perpetuate all animals and all plants. So, it was, I think the Endangered Species Act - if you can go back and review this thing - in history was kind of the driving force. Something

had to be done differently. That was part of the benefits of New Perspectives which was the forerunner to Ecosystem Management. Start doing things different so that you protect all species; well the term we use is biological diversity. So there was the new scientific knowledge, number one. Number two, trying to respond to endangered species problems that we had in a more comprehensive way — more than just species by species ~ which was really driving us crazy. And the third was clear cutting. I had talked a lot about clear cutting in the Forest Service. I had concluded in my mind that regardless of the merits of clear cutting, it just was not going to be acceptable in the future. We just... excepting unusual circumstances ... simply had to get out of the business of clear cutting even where it was silviculturally right. It was not acceptable by the people. I'd made several talks and talked to a lot of people in the Forest Service that we got to move beyond clear cutting to get away from that and get into partial cutting. So that was kind of a third force that was bearing on my mind. So, I guess as Chief - and a lot of other people in the Forest Service — we were looking for some kind of a strategy to deal with clear cutting and to deal with endangered species and fortunately the scientific knowledge was kind of coming along to help deal with these two issues. That was what was on my mind, what I was trying to do.

Freeman: Okay, in terms of this science did you kind of find yourself, you know, you said science was kind of a motivator, I guess the most straight forward way to ask you because this is kind of an impromptu question is, did this come from your own readings or was this staff informing you, a combination of both?

Robertson: Well, it was all of that and I've gone out to Region 6 and various places in the National Forests to look at New Perspective projects, and it was all of that coming together in my mind.

Freeman: Do you have any particular readings that you've found affected you a lot - because I'm trying to go back and read what some of you folks were reading and I want to make sure I get it all.

Robertson: Well, I was reading Jerry Franklin's work as I said, and I was talking to Jerry. It wasn't Jerry alone. I think science and research was kind of converging on this. Of course,

researchers are just like everybody else, once kind of an new idea gets out there and it starts kind of focusing attention... so there was kind of an coming together of a lot of scientific information. So, I was reading some of it, I was being briefed a lot too by Forest Service people. So, I don't know, to answer your question, I'd probably just read in a rapid fashion some of the same stuff everybody else was reading. But, it was probably more my personal observation going out talking to the scientists, our land managers and being briefed by Forest Service people. And, you can't underplay the controversy — and not only from some of the environmental groups and even other people that were concerned ~ about the management and that kind of political pressure from Congress. "Why isn't the Forest Service dealing with these issues?" We needed a strategy for dealing with the controversy on the hill and with Congress and with groups. I can remember the meeting where we decided to go with New Perspectives and there was some debate among my staff about that. Basically it wasn't disagreeing with the concept of New Perspectives, but it was putting science on "fast forward." Throughout the history of forestry — you know, I gave several speeches and I used the relay race vs. the basketball game analogy - and up until that time researchers would go and do their research and come to conclusions and then they would develop a technology transfer plan maybe ten years later, and that was part of the criticism of the Forest Service. It took us about ten to fifteen years to take scientific ideas and knowledge and finally get it applied on the ground. So with this New Perspectives ~ remember our discussions — we put the thing on "fast forward," I mean we went almost from concept with a somewhat limited experience to a major program; we debated that. Is now the time to do this or should we kind of go through the slow, normal procedure by which you finally adapt research, get it implemented into management decision making and then the field guy and the technology transfer, and all that stuff. I remember saying in the meeting as we were discussing this: "Look, the Forest Service needs bold action here, we don't have the time to go through this normal process. We need to take some assumption or leap of faith here that this is the way to go and do it on an experimental basis, you know, but get it spread just as fast as we can and move forward and take a strategy that, yes, we got some problems, we need to make some adjustments to reflect endangered species, people's concerns about clear cutting," and I remember saying at the meeting, "I don't see any viable alternative on the table to do this and we need to just make a bold decision and move forward." The only thing we were conservative on is saying New

Perspectives is an experimental pilot test program but we sure pushed our field people to get together with our scientists and researchers in the Forest Service and experiment on the ground with what we can do. So that was the debate — how much do we take this kind of new concept based on past ways we dealt with new research information, a major concept like that. It would've taken years to get there, but we just kind of did it. I was amazed. I remember the meeting. The staff was kind of split, and I remember I said "sometimes the Chief has to say well, I've considered everything everybody has had to say and this is kind of where I think we oughta go." I remember I was at that point. We need to move forward and say we've got a new strategy that deal with the issues, and this is what it is.

Freeman: Who on the hill were you getting pressure from? Another way of asking that question is who would you recommend I interview both in terms of people who just plain got you mad and in terms of people who were cooperating. Who would be a good person to interview?

Robertson: Well, let me, I guess I used the word pressure from the hill. I mean there were all of these problems, endangered species, people were complaining about clear cutting and bad management by the Forest Service, and I don't recall so much political pressure as much — I guess you could call it that -- as the members of Congress, and rightly so, were saying, "Look Forest Service, what are you doing to deal with the issues? And I had a good relationship with my committee chairmen, Congressman [Bruce] Vento [Minnesota, Democrat- Farmer-Labor1] was very much involved in that... he was my committee chairman on Public Lands and Interior. My chairman in the Agriculture Committee was Harold Volkmer, really a great guy, from Missouri... [Rep. Harold Volkmer, Democrat, chaired the Forests, Family Farms, and Energy Subcommittee of the Agriculture Committee, whose chairman was E. de la Garza, Dem, from Texas.]

Freeman: He was from the Ag. Committee?

Robertson: He was from Missouri. He was defeated that last session, but...

Freeman: Was he a Democrat?

Robertson: Yeah. I had to deal with democratic Congress leadership. People may think it's odd working for Democrats reporting to Republican Congress. I had the reverse situation during my tenure. There's always the group of congressmen that bought in with the philosophy and strategy of the environmental groups. They never liked anything the Forest Service did. Senator Al Gore was one of them, Miller from California was the chairman of the Interior, full Interior Committee. There was a whole host of members of Congress that basically reflected the views of the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club. That group of Congressmen was never able to make much progress. They were all trying to make things difficult for the Forest Service. The reasonable people that were kind of in control of managing things on the hill were very reasonable to deal with so it was more like "we're getting all this flack up here, Forest Service; what are you doing do deal with it? You gotta have a strategy." Of course New Perspectives, Ecosystem Management was, in at least in the broad context, "yeah, we've got a strategy and this is what we're doing and this is how it affects this issue."

Freeman: When you finally did sign the memo in 1992, by then what did Ecosystem Management mean to you, if any difference than a year before. Sometimes a year can make a big difference. Did it...?

Robertson: Remember that once the people kind of got on this, including our researchers, the thinking and knowledge and articulation of this thing, I mean it kept evolving and progressing at a very rapid rate. So, it was the natural evolution of the same thing we were talking about under New Perspectives. What the 1992 memo did was move it from a pilot test experimental basis, to "this is the policy of the Forest Service now, "knowing that we've got a long ways to go to implement it. But as a policy we have a policy of Ecosystem Management on the National Forests so as far as what was in my mind, I mean I was just riding along with the evolution of the knowledge of the experience that was evolving from the Forest Service throughout this. I was quite proud of the Forest Service — researchers as well as our land managers out there that were doing the pilot testing and experimenting of it. They grabbed onto this thing, too, and the learning curve on this was pretty fast. And so, we're still dealing with the same concept but with

much more greater understanding of it and experience to implement it. We never rode another horse conceptually. It just kept evolving.

Now the one thing that is important on this history of this, you may get to it with your question so I'll go ahead and tell you this, it's quite interesting. The Forest Service ... a major policy issue like moving into Ecosystem Management, you have to get clearance through. I mean the Chief doesn't... the Chief - or I - made the decision, but I had to get clearance through my political bosses — the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Agriculture and in this case, the White House. Of course a big part of the Chief's job is to figure out what the federal policy oughta be for the Forest Service and bring around his political bosses to support that.

Kind of an interesting thing on this memo, the timing of it. Bill Riley who was the administrator of the EPA, we knew each other before he became Administrator. So Bill and I kind of touch base every once and awhile and Bill and I had lunch a time or two over clear cutting, cause he was very concerned about clear cutting, and he and I spent some time discussing that. So then we had the Earth conference down in Rio in June of 1992, and Bill was head of the U.S. delegation in Rio. And I don't know if you remember the meeting down there but it was kind of rough on the United States. Bill was getting beat up pretty bad in Rio from other countries about the clear cutting, well, you know, that the United States was not as environmentally sensitive as we should be and that we talked a better game than we were. He was getting beat up over clear cutting and endangered species, pollution, clean air and notice we're still arguing about — I noticed today the President today made a decision dealing with clean air — reduction of ... global warming and reduction of gases that pollute and contribute to global warming. That was the big issue down there. Ironically some of the Americans down there, some of the environmental groups went there with a strategy that I guess would make the United States look bad, some of our own people, including Al Gore. Al Gore was down there, he and environmental group representatives met with the press; he made some bad statements about his own country, how bad we were treating the environment which I'm amazed never came out of the campaigns. I called the Republicans and said you'd better look at the press statement of Al Gore had in Rio during the Earth Conference. I almost viewed it as treason, talking so bad about his own country.

So, Bill was under a lot of pressure and President Bush was coming down in a few days to make a speech...(end of side A) to do something positive, we're getting beat up down here even by some of our own American environmentalists. And it was kind of a fortunate situation I guess in that Clayton Yeutter who was my previous boss as secretary of agriculture and as things evolved was kind of a chief policy staff in the White House at the time... he was talking to Bill Riley. Riley kept saying, "the President's getting beat up here, I'm getting beat up down here, the president is going to be embarrassed, we need some initiatives to say how we're responding."

So, Clayton who was the policy staff and my previous boss who I knew extremely well, just called me on the phone — oh, and by the way, Riley and I talked about the clear cutting issue and I think maybe Riley suggested to Clayton, why don't you talk to the Chief of the Forest Service, see if we can't get some policy on the clear cutting. So, Bill and I previously talked about that. Clayton called me direct, went past the secretary of agriculture and everybody because he knew me, and we were friends. He said, "Can we come up with some kind of a policy on clear cutting for the President for when he goes down in about a week to Rio." Of course, that's another one of those times when you've got to make a decision rather quickly. Fortunately, the Forest Service had been milling this around for quite a long time. I said, "Yes, Clayton I can give you a policy statement on clear cutting that basically says the Forest Service stopped using clear cutting as a standard silvicultural practice in the Forest Service and that it will only be used on an exceptional basis, but it won't be due to economics." So, he says "Great, put that together; let's see if we can't get this worked out in the next two or three days and the President can announce it at Rio and say we no longer be doing clear cutting as a standard silvicultural practice on federal land in the United States." So I said "by the way, Clayton, there's another half of this," and I said, "I'd like to announce Ecosystem Management as a policy of the Forest Service at the same time and make it clear cutting and Ecosystem Management, and I think that will go over well too." He says "what is that again?" And, I said "Ecosystem Management." He didn't even know what that was. And he says "tell me more," and I kind of explained it: "it's a more environmentally sensitive way to manage forest lands, deal with endangered species, in much broader perspective." He says "well all that sounds good; the President would like to say that." So he gave me a deadline; he said "by tomorrow morning, you have a draft over here on Ecosystem Management and clear cutting."

And, of course, we talked about this for a few years in the Forest Service but we didn't have any memo written or policy statement. So I remember, I went home, and gosh, I thought about "here's the letter I gotta send to the White House tomorrow morning at 8:00, fax it over and the President's going to look at it, Clayton's going to coordinate it with the President... Bill Riley." So I thought about how to put this letter together, I actually wrote this letter, in fact I got up at 3:00 A.M. in the morning after thinking about it all night; I drafted this June 4, 1992 letter starting at 3:00 A.M. in the morning. And I drafted it and called my secretary and said "You better be at the office at 7:00 in the morning because we gotta have this fax to the White House, to Clayton Yeutter by 8:00." So she came in and she typed it up. I did a little more editing, and of course I was part of all the discussions in the Forest Service up to that point. But it got down ... I had the power of the pen and I didn't have time to check with anybody else. So I drafted this and then I sent it over to Clayton.

He read it, and I don't know if he checked with the President or not at that point, and he says "yeah, this sounds good." He says "keep it under wraps, but I think this is the way we want to go." And by that time I hadn't even coordinated with the Secretary of Agriculture or my assistant secretary, so as soon as I got that OK from Clayton, I had to backtrack and sit down with John Bueter, who was my acting assistant secretary at that time, and go over it with him. John was very supportive. And it's such a major policy decision, we thought we better go down and talk to the secretary about it. Well, we couldn't get the secretary, but we got the Chief of Staff; they didn't like the sound of it too well. Anyway, we finally got their approval, I was told ... normally the chain of command is from the White House to the Secretary to the Forest Service. In this case it was the White House to me, then me backtracking through the Secretary's office. They finally said, "Well, we don't particularly care for this thing you're doing, but if that's what the President wants, what Clayton Yeutter wants, Bill Riley wants for Rio, its okay with us." Again everybody did a little editing on it. So we finalized it.

In the mean time I kept talking with Clayton Yeutter in the White House; they were having a terrible time deciding if the President was going to announce this at Rio as part of his speech, or was he going to announce it here in the United States. They mulled that over for about a day.

Finally Clayton called me back and he said, "Well the President has made a decision. He says that we decided you're the professional forester of the United States, Chief of the Forest Service, that you ought to announce this domestically, just ahead of the President making his speech, and he will announce it in Rio in his speech at the Earth conference." So that's what we did; so I wrote the letter drafted it on June 4th, got signed it on June 4th, communicated it, announced it in the United States and about that time Bush was on a plane to Rio and if you'll read his speech in Rio, he included it as one of the things the United States is doing to deal with the clear cutting issue and endangered species and the concerns about old growth forest and all of that. So that's just kind of the history of that memo, which is kind of interesting.

Freeman: Yeah, that's real interesting. Is the letter yet public, in such way that I can get a hold of it and just have it and read it, or is that still...

Robertson: ...ahh, yeah I have a copy of it. You could get one there in region one, they would have a copy. In fact, Hal Salwasser, again you may know his history, we put together a new perspectives coordinators staff in Washington office to help us on this, as we implemented New Perspectives. And Hal Salwasser was the guy who headed up New Perspectives for us. Hal was another key person that kept talking to me about Ecosystem Management, our progress and what we needed to do to help a ... I guess you could say educate the Chief. And he had some part in, well he didn't draft the letter, but he'd written a lot of stuff and I had pulled from some of the stuff he had written. So just talk to Hal; Hal may be someone you want to interview because he was very, very much involved as our New Perspectives staff bringing about Ecosystem Management. In terms of timing and how that evolved, Hal spent full time on that, his memory may be a little better cause I was dealing with other issues, but he was full time on this as our New Perspectives staff person. So he probably can fill in a lot of details that I don't have and probably has a better memory of timing and all that.

Freeman: Well any last minute comments you can think of, or advise or suggestions or...

Robertson: No, I pretty well, I think told you what I know about this thing, of course' I left soon after the Clinton administration came on board and I think Jack Ward Thomas, the New Chief of

the Forest Service has just continued to press on with Ecosystem Management and it is an ever evolving thing. So it's a policy that I think really the Clinton Administration, Jack Ward Thomas, the New Chief, is just continuing to reinforce, so this policy has so far stood the test of time with the people. So it was a major watershed event I believe in terms of policy affecting the National Forests, and it's not just the National Forests, its been picked up by most of the agencies now.

Freeman: In a sense [Ecosystem Management] is the first policy, Forest Service policy, that really ever had kind of a title, if you think about it. I mean, what would we call, I guess we could call the 80s and late 70s, we could probably call them NFMA, planning policy.

Robertson: Yeah, but that's kind of process oriented, this one is substance. Well... and a nice thing about it, I think a lot of thought and deliberation has to go into policy and especially one that's going to affect things for a long, long time. Soon, there will be a new Ecosystem Management-comparable policy, say 25-30 years out. It's kind of like multiple use; it kind of went from multiple use to Ecosystem Management. Multiple use was in practice ... well, even though I guess the term kind of came into being when the act passed in 1960 ... but it was kind of a — Gifford Pinchot talked about "wise use," and wise uses. So I guess if I kind of went back in history, there's wise use, which I guess Gifford Pinchot initiated, somewhere along the way that got turned into multiple use and now we're into Ecosystem Management. So we kind of have three different, what you might call broad overriding umbrella policy that kind of sets the framework for everything else.

It is kind of complicated, and government policy is a messy process. So again you might have... the fortunate thing about this is - and I've said this to you a couple of times - is that the Forest Service had the experience of a couple of years or however long it was with new perspectives and so we had kind of conditioned people, including people in the Forest Service for this, so even though it just one day popped out of the system as official policy, it wasn't just like this is all new stuff to us; it just took the drift of the way things were going and put a peg down and said, now this is it.

Freeman: Ohh, Okay, well he has been very modest so far...

Robertson: Well now Jack was a... I think Jerry Franklin probably gets too much credit, for New Forestry, or New Perspectives in Ecosystem Management. I mean there was a lot of scientists — he deserves a lot of credit — but I mean there was a lot of other scientists working on this, and Jack Ward Thomas was one of them, and I think Jack, especially with his Spotted Owl work, which I think he originally came up with a ecosystems approach, and really drove the point home that Ecosystem Management was the way to deal with endangered and threatened and sensitive species. So Jack really moved this whole thing forward as a scientist, as head of the spotted owl committee that put together that report.

Freeman: So Jack deserves a lot of the scientific credit along with Jerry Franklin for helping bring this all about?

Robertson: Well, Jack is a world class wildlife researchers and of course a lot of New Perspectives or, Ecosystem Management is all about trying to help the habitat for all of the creatures or animals. Jack really brought that together with Ecosystem Management.

Freeman: Okay, that's good food for thought too.

Robertson: You got two people right there in Missoula, Jack Ward Thomas and Hal Salwasser that were key dominate players in this thing.

END OF INTERVIEW