Policy Commentary

A Red Flag: "The Science is Clear"

By Paul W. Adams, Chair, OSAF Policy and Legislation Committee

The claim that "the science is clear" has been heard a lot in recent years, but it especially caught my attention when I heard a public agency employee say it emphatically to the Oregon Board of Forestry at their June 3rd meeting in Salem. A primary focus of that meeting was a discussion of several alternatives for modifying Oregon's riparian protection requirements for some fish-bearing streams on forest lands to maintain cool water temperatures. The agency employee was referring to the environmental science that he believed supported requiring landowners to retain a 90- to 100-foot, no-harvest buffer on those streams.

Consider the context: Voluntary remarks given during the public comment period as the Board is grappling with a policy decision about potential rule changes that would affect the property and activities of thousands of forest landowners, managers and operators. Moreover, in its rulemaking, the Board is specifically directed by state law to: "choose the least burdensome alternative… and resource benefits achieved by the rule must be proportional to the harm caused by forest practices…"

"The science is clear" often seems to be dealt as a trump card to convey a supremacy of some science over other "lesser" concerns or information. Yet, in brief comments at public hearings the science of note is not always clearly identified or verified. And with forest resource issues, "hard" (technical) science also tends to be given most emphasis, whereas social ("soft") science and socio-economic data that policy makers must consider are often much more limited. Even when the technical science is directly relevant to the policy decision, it is rarely so clear that there is nothing to discuss and debate, especially for an issue as complex and site-specific as the links between riparian forest conditions and small increments of stream temperature.

Thus, when stated in a forest policy context, when we hear that "the science is clear," it should raise a red flag about both the science itself and the person making the proclamation. For the former, we should ask whether the science is inclusive of vital socio-economic knowledge and information, as well as whether the science has been fully vetted to account for variable site-specific conditions and other key influences. And for an individual who states in a policy context that "the science is clear," there seems a high likelihood that they have: a) an incomplete or incorrect conception of the relevant science, b) an advocacy agenda that invokes science, or c) both traits.

The issue of science that is unclear, selective or presented with advocacy is not new. Over two decades ago, the Board of Forestry was grappling similarly with rulemaking for riparian forests. In 1992, a letter from 12 academic and agency scientists was sent to the Oregon Dept. of Forestry, with a passionate plea for mandatory no-harvest buffers along fish-bearing streams. Later that year, then-Board of Forestry Chair Janet McLennan spoke publicly about that input versus another document on the same issue from the OSU College of Forestry: "…the letter [from the 12 scientists] is perhaps effective as a cry of alarm… [In contrast, the College summary] is a very powerful document, and its power derives not from passion but from the disinterested presentation of relevant facts."

(Main text approx. 550 words)