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EDITORIAL

## The trees for the forest

IN A NEAT BIT OF CIRCULAR reasoning, the Bush administration is proposing to sell parts of America's national forests in order to save them. The U.S. Forest Service's budget is too thin to manage its lands and maintain its programs, and the president's answer to the problem, rather than increasing the Forest Service's budget, is to cut it further and pay for programs with proceeds from the sale of forest land.

It's not that Forest Service land is sacrosanct. Land holdings can lose their value to the public. Proposals last year to sell some Forest Service holdings, such as lots in the middle of industrial areas, were a reasonable way to get rid of liabilities and bring in money.

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But give the administration a tree and it will take a forest. The president's proposal would amount to the biggest sell-off ever of forest land — 300,000 acres — with California taking an especially big hit.

If the sales were raising money to purchase other land more valuable to the nation's heritage, this move would be defensible, even sensible. But President Bush's budget plan is to use the proceeds to make its annual contribution to programs for rural schools and roads. Sales of land represent a one-time capital gain. Schools and roads — or other programs — will need funding year after year.

The rural program keeps local education and other services going in forest towns where public revenue from timber has dried up. It's scheduled to expire at the end of 2006, but there is broad congressional support for continuing it for five more years. Which raises the question: Which of the American public's possessions will the president auction off next year?

Even as Bush proposes to give the forests \$160 million less than last year, the forests face increasing pressure from all sides. Off-roaders and other recreational users are asking for more acreage and services, although last year a memo warned forest rangers that cutbacks would mean fewer tours and a reduction in ranger-station hours. The administration would strip vast tracts of land of their protection against road construction, and plans also call for allowing more tree cutting and oil drilling. Now the administration proposes to begin the process of cannibalizing the forests.

The national forest system was created for mixed uses — industry, recreation and wilderness. But it was never intended to be a cash cow that would pay the price for bad budgeting.

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