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Selling the Federal Forests, Adrien E. Gamache, Ed.

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SELLING THE FEDERAL FORESTS

ADRIEN E. GAMACHE, Ed.

Seattle: Institute of Forest Resources, University of Washington,
College of Forest Resources, Contribution No. 50. 1984. Pp. iv+273.

The issue of whether the public interest is best served by public or private ownership and management of natural resources has been the subject of a rapidly expanding literature. One aspect of this issue, the transfer of ownership and management of government lands to the private sector, is known as privatization. The arguments for and against the privatization of public lands generally focus on the issues of efficiency and equity. The proponents of privatization hold that the private sector, guided by the pursuit of profit, can generally be relied upon to be more efficient than the public sector.¹ Their opponents, on the other hand, claim that market imperfections (in particular inadequate competition or the existence of externalities) are of enough importance that the public sector may allocate resources better than the private sector. Furthermore, the opponents of privatization claim that the private sector cannot be counted upon to allocate resources equitably between the various segments of today's society or between the current and future generations.

Selling the Federal Forests is a collection of essays on the sale of commodity producing forest lands prepared for a two-day symposium held by the College of Forest Resources at the University of Washington in April of 1983. The essays make the arguments and counterarguments of both groups in a highly accessible fashion. There are sixteen essays in all, and the transcript of a brief panel discussion of four of the conference participants. Obvious care was taken in the selection of symposium participants so that nearly every perspective of the privatization issue is represented.

The opening essay, by Thomas R. Waggener, provides an excellent introduction to the remaining papers by presenting a historical review of the origins of the federal forests, their current status, and current issues in forest ownership. The next seven essays explore the positions of economists and political scientists regarding federal forest land sales. By alternating the essays which support privatization with those of its opponents, Adrien E. Gamache, the editor of the volume, has effectively presented both sides of the issue while at the same time maintaining the atmosphere of a debate.

The next three essays present the views of public agencies on priva-

1. This viewpoint is expressed in the essays by William R. Allen and Barney Dowdle. Interested readers should also see Stroup, *In Defense of Asset Management*, 5 CONTEMP. POL'Y ISSUES 14-21 (March 1984).

tization. A discussion of the Reagan administration's "Asset Management Program" from the perspective of a Department of Agriculture official begins this section and is followed by an essay describing the effects of privatization on state government. The section is concluded with a paper by a county government official on the effects of the sale of federal forest lands on local government. These essays are followed by a group of three papers voicing the concerns of environmentalists and recreationalists. The final two essays espouse the views of the forest products industry with respect to the privatization issue.

The essays are written at a level such that they are valuable to policy makers and academicians alike. They are generally of high quality and contain surprisingly little redundant material considering the large number of authors. One interesting aspect of the volume is the inclusion of the transcript of a brief question and answer period following each essay. This feature would have been even more valuable had the questioner's names been included in addition to their questions.

While I enjoyed the volume, I do have several small quibbles. First, the documentation of the essays is uneven. Several of the papers include excellent bibliographies (particularly useful in this respect is the piece by Christopher K. Leman) while others contain no references. When taken as a whole, readers will find plenty of citations to guide further reading.

Second, the book would be strengthened by the addition of a concluding essay which summarizes and ties the volume together. Although there is a panel discussion and question and answer period at the end of the book, it does not effectively serve this purpose.

Last, one aspect of the privatization issue, the *method* by which forest lands are transferred to the private sector, is not discussed. All transfer methods confer rights and impose costs on the involved parties. It is possible that the transfer method may involve contractual obligations or create economic incentives such that even the supporters of privatization would find public sector management preferable. The volume would have been improved by an essay addressing the efficiency of alternative transfer methods.

In conclusion, I believe that this book accomplishes its goals of exploring reasons for and against the sale of federal forest lands and the positions of various interest groups on this issue. It would be a valuable addition to the library of any individual interested in forestry or privatization. I recommend *Selling the Federal Forests* as a balanced introduction to the many viewpoints on this privatization.

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