

LA TIMES

Logging Proponent's Credentials Questioned

An emeritus professor has been highly visible in the push to log on federal land. He has a contract with a timber industry foundation.

By Bettina Boxall, Times Staff Writer
October 21, 2006

In the perennial battle over how the West's vast acreage of federal forests should be managed, science is a favorite weapon. And on the pro-logging side no academic has been as visible as Thomas M. Bonnicksen, particularly in California.

The Texas A&M emeritus professor of forest science has testified before Congress 13 times, written numerous op-ed pieces and been widely quoted in Western newspapers, including the Los Angeles Times. Always he sounds the same theme: Logging is the key to restoring public lands to their former fire-resistant state.

In his writings, Bonnicksen has commonly disclosed that he sits on the advisory board of the Auburn, Calif.-based Forest Foundation.

What he hasn't divulged is how lucrative his connection with the pro-logging timber industry-funded foundation has been. According to public tax documents, Bonnicksen collected \$109,000 from the foundation in the last two years as an independent contractor.

"He's always introduced as the leading expert on forest recovery, and he's just not. There's nothing in his record other than just talking and hand-waving," said UCLA ecology professor Philip Rundel, one of several academics who issued an open letter to the media this week questioning Bonnicksen's credentials.

"I don't care if people print his stuff or not. But he needs to be identified for what he is "a lobbyist."

The letter, signed by two other UC faculty members and the founding dean of Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences, accused Bonnicksen of having misrepresented scientific facts, and advancing views that "fall far outside the mainstream of scientific opinion."

The letter also disputed Bonnicksen's claim of an affiliation with the University of California. Although he has identified himself repeatedly as a visiting professor at UC Davis, officials there say that although Bonnicksen was once offered that title, he was never formally named a visiting professor.

Bonnicksen, who lives in Florida but frequently gives talks in California, said the letter writers were acting unethically and trying to silence him.

"I am a full professor for life," he said. "I have academic freedom. I may speak as I wish, and I've always tried to do that as honestly as possible and using the science I know and have access to."

Cheryl Rubin, vice president of communications for the Forest Foundation and its sister organization, the California Forest Products Commission, said Bonnicksen was paid "for the work he performed to educate Californians and people nationally: interacting with journalists, policymakers, students, professors. He gives speeches.

"We've always identified him with the Forest Foundation," she added. "I don't believe it's a common practice to say paid\$. How would you expect it to be revealed in an op-ed?"

Rubin said the nonprofit foundation gets slightly less than half of its money from the forest products commission, which is funded entirely through timber assessments. The foundation website lists on its board of directors executives of Sierra Pacific Industries and Sierra Forest Products, both major buyers of federal timber.

Bonnicksen, who said his foundation contract pays him \$38,000 a year plus travel reimbursements, said the funding posed no conflict.

"It's not the source of the money that's important," he said. "It's the integrity and scientific ability of the person. So I don't care where the money comes from because I am not saying anything now that I haven't said for 35 years. It has not tainted anything."

Bonnicksen said he believed he had been offered an appointment as a visiting professor at Davis, something UC officials don't dispute.

They say Bonnicksen was invited in the spring of 2004 to accept a yearlong visiting professorship by UC Davis professor Michael Barbour, who also serves on the Forest Foundation advisory board.

But a university official said Barbour never followed up with the formal procedure required to name a visiting professor, which involves approval by the faculty, the dean and the chancellor.

"While Bonnicksen thought he had a title, he in fact did not," said James MacDonald, executive associate dean for the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.

The administration sent Bonnicksen a letter Sept. 26 telling him to stop identifying himself as a visiting professor.

"It's taken off of everything," said Bonnicksen, who lectured at Davis only once. "I kept trying to get over there and it kept never fitting in my schedule, not because I didn't want to. It was because I couldn't do it."

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