

FORESTRY AROUND THE WORLD

A Global Perspective: John Parrotta Leads Forest Service's International Science Team

By Steve Wilent

As SAF members are well aware, the US Forest Service is much more than the manager of our great national forests. At the very least, its State and Private Forestry branch, Forest Inventory and Analysis program, and Forest Products Lab, for example, are familiar to us. It is less well known that the agency's Research and Development section has a strong interest in international forestry issues.

John Parrotta is the agency's national research program leader, international science issues, a position he's held since 2000. He holds bachelor's degrees in biology and chemistry, a master's in ecology, and a doctorate, from Yale University, in tropical forest ecology and management. Some of his research interests are traditional forest-related knowledge and practices, adaptation of forests and people to climate change, and the relationship among forest management, biodiversity, and climate change mitigation (in particular, REDD+, or Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation plus conservation, sustainable management of forests, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in reducing emissions (see www.un-redd.org).

Parrotta has won several awards in recent years, most recently the Group Superior Honor Award, presented in 2012 by the US Department of State, Bureau of Oceans and International Environment "for extraordinary efforts to advance and protect US interests during the 11th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity which furthered efforts to promote the conservation of biological diversity worldwide."

In addition, Parrotta is chair of the scientific committee of the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) 2014 World Congress. The event, scheduled for October 5–11 in Salt Lake City, will be held in conjunction with the joint SAF/Canadian Institute of Forestry Convention, October 8–11.

I recently talked with Parrotta about his work with the agency and with IUFRO. What follows is a portion of our lengthy conversation.

What does your job with the Forest Service entail?

The main function of the position is to work with the Forest Service's international programs and also with the State Department and other agencies in developing US positions for international policy debates and discussions regarding treaties such as the Convention on Biological Diversity—since 2001, I've been representing the US for anything in the convention involving forests or programs arising from it. I'm involved with CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, which often deals with trade in rare and endangered plants. I'm also involved to some extent with the UN Climate Change Conferences, with an emphasis on biodiversity and tropical forest issues, which is really my area of expertise — tropical forest management and restoration.

All that takes maybe one quarter or one third of my time. Some of my work is devoted to research, usually scientific syntheses. But the bulk of my work is with the International Union of Forest Research Organizations.



Since 2000, John Parrotta has been the US Forest Service's national research program leader, international science issues.

Why is the US Forest Service interested in forests in other countries and international forestry issues?

We all live in one world. The US has a big stake in what goes on internationally, most notably in the area of forest health. The US does a lot of collaborative research with Mexico, China, Canada, and other countries. One of the main areas of research is in forest pests. A lot of ships go back and forth between China [and other nations], and sometimes they bring wood borers or other pests with them. So there's very strong support for doing research into these forest pests. How to spot them in advance, what to do once they are discovered, how to deal with them once they're established. That's just one compelling reason for international collaboration in forestry research.

In general, I think it's good for everyone to be exposed to knowledge and approaches that we wouldn't have thought of if we hadn't been talking to people, wherever they are. We can avoid reinventing the wheel in many cases.

I should note that there is a separate office within the Forest Service, the International Programs Office, which is not involved in research. They do an awful lot of collaboration internationally on projects that typically are funded by USAID—the US Agency for International Development. USAID often has projects for which they need technical expertise that the Forest Service can provide through the International Programs Office [see www.fs.fed.us/global/].

Here in the United States we hear the phrase "forest restoration" frequently, but it's not often associated with tropical forests. What's involved in tropical forest restoration?

My work in this area has to do mainly with restoring some form of productivity and ecological integrity to sites that have really been beaten up, highly degraded.

Mine sites, areas that have been affected by severe erosion, or cultural mismanagement over decades—sites that don't normally bounce back quickly. If you leave a forest system alone, even those that have been highly degraded, they eventually bounce back. That's true worldwide. But it takes some sites longer to recover. I look at the "hard luck" cases, the sites where we don't see much happening for many years or decades unless you take some active management measures. That's my own area of interest, but, of course, there are many other points along the spectrum of tropical forest restoration. In any case, the basic idea is to recover the goods and services that forests provide quicker than just letting nature run its course.

How did you get involved with IUFRO?

In a nutshell, IUFRO's main purpose is to foster international collaboration in forest science. It's a great thing for individual scientists to get involved in. My experience is probably fairly typical. I was conducting my research and in Puerto Rico, where I had interaction with a few colleagues here and there, including in Brazil. Then a senior Forest Service colleague who had been involved in IUFRO for a number of years invited me to start a new working party on tropical forest restoration. That was back in about 1993. At that time, I thought of it as an opportunity to interact with people who had similar interests, people I hadn't had a chance to work with before. It was fantastic, because it opened my eyes to things that were going on in the same field I was working in, in different parts of the world. I learned a lot from some very interesting research collaborations, made some

friendships, and I've continued working with IUFRO ever since, including as part of my Forest Service job.

Tell me about the IUFRO meeting in Salt Lake City.

The IUFRO World Congress is the big event for the organization, and is usually held every five years. Unlike the other events that are held in the intervening years, which tend to be more specialized,


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the World Congress brings together people working in all kinds of different fields and covers a wide array of forest science topics and issues. The theme of the upcoming Congress is "Sustaining Forests, Sustaining People: the Role of Research." That brings together all of the areas of research and international forestry. There's something in it for everyone interested in forestry around the world.

For information about the IUFRO World Congress, see iufro2014.com; for the joint SAF/Canadian Institute of Forestry Convention, www.xcdsystem.com/saf/site14.

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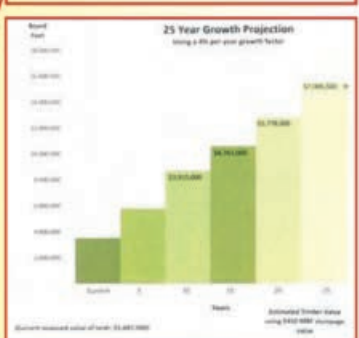
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