Not long after coming to the Pinchot Institute, I was asked what I thought had been Gifford Pinchot’s greatest contribution to forestry and conservation in the United States. Was it the introduction of scientific forestry from Europe to the US, establishing sustained-yield management in place of cut-and-run forest exploitation? Was it the founding of the US Forest Service, a spirited agency free of the corruption that characterized the US Department of the Interior at the time, and dedicated to serving “the greatest good, for the greatest number, in the long run”? Was it the establishment of what is now the nation’s oldest school of forestry at Yale, or the first professional society for American foresters?

Valuable though all these accomplishments may be, Pinchot’s greatest and most enduring legacy to the American people may be that he set in motion the process that has today given us 192 million acres of publicly-owned National Forests, to be protected and sustainably managed for the benefit of all Americans in perpetuity.

Yet, as visionary as Pinchot was, it is fair to say that even he recognized only a small part of the true value of these forest lands. The 1897 Organic Act recognized only two purposes for which these forests were to be managed: protecting the headwaters of navigable rivers, and providing an uninterrupted supply of timber, particularly for homebuilding. In time, however, the nation would recognize the value of the National Forests for other public purposes: wildlife, recreation, forage, wilderness, habitat for rare species, and most recently for mitigating climate change. Were the National Forests sequestering and storing carbon in Pinchot’s day? Of course they were—society just didn’t realize it or value it at the time. What else are forests doing at this very moment, quietly and unnoticed, that help to ensure our own long-term sustainability? What other forest ecosystem functions are there that benefit us today, but that will only be fully appreciated by our descendants a century from now?

Whatever those functions might be, we can count ourselves enormously fortunate that our National Forests will still be there years from now, serving our needs in ways that today we can only guess. We might argue strenuously among ourselves over the proper use of these public forests and their resources, as well we should in a free and democratic society. But at the end of the day, these lands remain protected from development and exploitation. They will serve the needs of the next generation as well as they have served this generation and those that have gone before. In a very real sense, the value of the contribution that Pinchot and his contemporaries made in establishing the National Forests was truly infinite.

But as extensive as America’s public forests may be, they represent less than a quarter of the nation’s total area of productive forest land. What of the other three-quarters that is in private ownership? The good news is that these forests too have been providing an almost infinite array of public goods and services, as well as private income, for all these decades, at little or no cost to the taxpayer. The bad news is that all this is changing quickly, with consequences that we cannot fully predict.

For more than a decade, America has been losing its forests and open space at an average of more than 3,000 acres each day—that’s roughly four acres each minute. Once forests have been converted to housing subdivisions and shopping malls they are essentially gone forever. Who can tell what public values have also disappeared along with the forests themselves—watershed values, wildlife habitat, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation opportunities? How much forest capacity for mitigating climate change are we losing, just when it is dawning on us how important this may be to our own future?

Even when forest land is converted with the best of intentions, the unintended negative consequences can be significant. A recent study by researchers at Princeton University and the University of Minnesota found that the conversion of forests releases large amounts of stored car-

Why does it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you’ve got ’til it’s gone? —Joni Mitchell

V. Alaric Sample
bon, and also destroys their capacity for future carbon sequestration—so much so that, even if the land is replanted to bioenergy crops destined to offset the use of fossil fuels, it can take as much as 350 years for these biofuels to offset just the carbon released in the conversion process itself. It is estimated that, worldwide, forest conversion is responsible for as much as one-fifth of all human-induced greenhouse gas emissions—a source of carbon emissions greater than all the cars in the world combined. Clearly we need to think twice before contributing to a further net loss of forests, even for what may at first appear to be worthy purposes.

In national and state forest policy in the US, we’ve developed a wide range of mechanisms to encourage the conservation and sustainable management of private forests—financial incentives, cost-share programs, preferential property taxes, conservation easements, income tax credits, and tax deductions for forest land donations to public agencies or qualified nonprofit organizations. State governments are stepping in with new ideas, such as a revolving loan fund for private woodland owners in recognition that ownership fragmentation and land conversion often take place as a result of short-term financial needs such as a family medical crisis. Others are attempting to stem the overall loss of forest cover while still affording opportunities for responsible development through “no net loss” policies for private forests.

Some are pinning their hopes on carbon credits to make private woodland ownership financially viable in the future, while others grasp still further to the possibility of selling credits for ecosystem services, such as protecting water quality. The list of willing suppliers of ecosystem services credits is large, but the potential buyers are for the most part yet to be identified. In the absence of a substantial policy intervention to stimulate the development of new markets, demand will be limited to voluntary “good will” purchasers. Innovative approaches such as these hold great promise, but their real-world effectiveness at a meaningful scale will not be proven for some time to come.

In the meantime, we already have an array of federal/state cooperative programs, such as Forest Legacy, that were developed expressly to reduce the conversion and fragmentation of private forest lands. Forest Legacy is focused on facilitating state acquisition of conservation easements on high-value forests under imminent threat of development. It was initiated when most of the forest industry lands in the US, at one time about 15 percent of the nation’s productive forest land, was being sold off to private investors. Since its first appropriations in 1992, the Forest Legacy Program has conserved more than one and a half million acres across 35 states and territories.

There is broad agreement that Forest Legacy is both effective and cost-efficient in achieving its objectives—when it is adequately funded. In the President’s Budget for 2009, funding for the Forest Legacy Program is reduced to $12.5 million, compared with $60 million in 2007 and $30 million in 2008. Other federal/state cooperative programs aimed at conserving and sustainably managing private woodlands have been slashed an average of 60 percent.

This year, US military spending is expected to top $750 billion, more than the current military expenditures of all the rest of the world’s nations combined. As the experience of some of our former Cold War adversaries demonstrates, it is possible for even a superpower to defeat itself from within if government funding priorities become skewed. Considering the magnitude of public values—known and unknown—that are lost forever as millions of acres of America’s private forests are cleared for development, it is indeed time to re-examine our priorities and ensure that the public interest embodied within intact, well-managed, private forests is served.