

October 17, 2006

Open Letter to the Media

We are sending you this letter as a concerned group of forest scientists and/or fire resource managers at major research universities. We feel compelled to write to you in response to the many letters, opinion articles, and commentaries that Dr. Thomas Bonnicksen has been sending to newspapers across the United States. Most of us have served on federal and state committees reviewing the fire management policies of the National Park Service and other agencies, and we all maintain active research programs. We feel very strongly that not only do the views and statements of Dr. Bonnicksen fall far outside the mainstream of scientific opinion, but more importantly that Dr. Bonnicksen has misrepresented himself and his qualifications to speak to these issues.

These misrepresentations include:

University Affiliation: In all of his contacts with the media over the past several years, Dr. Bonnicksen has in part justified his credibility by identifying himself as Visiting Professor at University of California Davis. This is false. Dr. Bonnicksen does not now, nor has he ever had, an appointment at UC Davis. The University of California has now sent Dr. Bonnicksen a "cease and desist" letter demanding that he not use their name.

We find this misrepresentation extremely troubling, particularly to those of us on the faculty of the University of California.

Credibility: Dr. Bonnicksen introduces himself, as do his supporters, as one of the leading national experts on such topics as forest management, fire ecology, and forest history. In fact, there is nothing in his academic record of research or experience to justify such a characterization. By any major university standard of achievement, his academic record is weak, consisting largely of letters to the editor and oped articles. This is not a record that would achieve tenure at a major research university.

Dr. Bonnicksen's unusual theories of forest structure and stability, expressed many years ago were never widely accepted. The state of scientific and empirical knowledge regarding the fire ecology and management of these forests has grown exponentially since Dr. Bonnicksen collected his data three decades ago. Today we have a comprehensive and sophisticated picture of forest structure and fire ecology that has been measured, validated and published by members of the academic community, the National Park Service, and the United States Geological Survey. In simple terms, there is no serious scientific support for Dr. Bonnicksen's ideas of forest management.

As academic researchers, we welcome increased public understanding of scientific issues and an open discourse representing a diversity of credible views. However, we feel very strongly that Dr. Bonnicksen's views and misrepresentations of factual material, as well as his academic credentials, should be labeled for the political views that they are and not presented as serious

science. The opinions he presents are contradicted by all prevailing scientific data. We ask that you consider these issues of credibility before publishing his oped articles and commentaries in the future, but of course these decisions are yours to make.

With all respect,

Philip W. Rundel
Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Los Angeles

Michael F. Allen
Director of the Center for Conservation Biology
Professor of Plant Pathology and Biology
University of California, Riverside

Norman L. Christensen, Jr.
Founding Dean and Professor of Ecology
Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences
Duke University

Jon E. Keeley
Adjunct Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
University of California, Los Angeles

Philip W. Rundel
Professor of Biology
Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
University of California (UCLA)
Los Angeles CA 90095

tel: 310 825-4072, 825-8777
fax: 310 825-9433
rundel@biology.ucla.edu
