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From the Los Angeles Times

## A Student's Forest Paper Sparks One Hot Debate

By Bettina Boxall and Janet Wilson  
Times Staff Writers

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SELMA, Ore. — During tedious days of counting tiny Douglas fir seedlings on blackened slopes west of here, Daniel Donato never imagined his work would put him in the crosshairs of Congress. He was just studying how forests grow back after a fire.

But after his research appeared in the online version of the journal *Science* in January, the Oregon State University graduate student began to feel like a lightning rod. A federal agency briefly yanked funding for his project, irate politicians and timber interests e-mailed Donato's dean to complain, congressmen grilled him, and professors at his own university tried unsuccessfully to keep the paper from being published in the print edition of *Science*.

His principal finding — that post-fire logging hindered forest regrowth — was hardly revolutionary. But the study, with Donato as lead author, was published just as Congress was considering legislation to make it easier for timber companies to undertake salvage logging of dead trees after fires on federal land. That bill, backed by the Bush administration and recently passed by the House, is based on an underlying assumption that burned forests recover more quickly if they are logged and then replanted.

Donato's results provided ammunition to the bill's opponents — and more broadly to environmentalists fighting salvage logging, which makes up roughly a third of the timber sales from national forests across the country. They argue that dead trees provide not only wildlife habitat, but the nourishment for a new forest that will ultimately provide a richer, more diverse ecosystem. That is anathema to timber advocates, who see dead wood left to rot unharvested as not only counterproductive but a waste of resources.

Donato, 29, and his five co-authors knew they were entering a fraught debate. Still, the reaction has stunned them.

"It's a one-page research note," Donato said, referring to the paper published in *Science*. "It's not that earth-shattering, and it really would be very easy to put the paper in context and sort of almost trivialize it.

"Instead," he said, "it's been turned into this giant political thing. It just blows me away. I never anticipated that."

The seedling paper exploded from the often-insular world of academic research onto the national stage at a time of growing acrimony between scientists and government policy makers, who've been accused of ignoring and suppressing research that doesn't fit their agendas.

The collision of politics, business and science is vividly highlighted in hundreds of e-mail exchanges obtained and publicly released by a Democratic Oregon state senator. They place Oregon State Forestry Dean Hal Salwasser — a former U.S. Forest Service official who has publicly advocated the salvage bill — at the center of efforts to counter the paper.

"Nice Work!" Oregon state Senate Republican leader Ted Ferrioli sarcastically declared in an e-mail to the dean. Such research, he wrote, amounted to "rifle shots politically directed at resource producers and timber-dependent communities."

Columbia Helicopters Inc. Vice President Max Merlich complained to Salwasser: "The likelihood of this paper being used successfully against us in court on salvage logging litigation is very high.

"How OSU handles this from this point on could play an important part on our issues," said Merlich, whose Oregon based-company hauls logs by helicopter out of steep or remote sites in national forest timber sales, much of it in salvage projects.

Merlich's comments could not be easily ignored by the College of Forestry, which gets 12% of its research funding from state timber receipts. Columbia describes itself as the largest helicopter logging operation in the world. Three years ago, the wife of Columbia's co-founder donated \$1 million to the college for an endowed professorship.

The company largesse also reaches into politics. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Columbia and its executives have given more than \$300,000 to state and federal GOP committees and candidates, including some \$22,000 to the Republican author

of the salvage bill.

In an interview with The Times, the dean said he did not quibble with Donato's data but said the authors had overreached in their interpretation. "They found what they found," Salwasser said. "The whole argument is over the conclusions they made."

Nonetheless, his alliances are clear in the e-mails. In one message to a lumber company employee, he called anti-logging activists "scam artists" and "goons" and said their appeals and lawsuits are a variation on Mafia "protection" tactics.

Salwasser has since been faulted for his handling of the controversy by a college committee, which in a draft report last month cited the e-mails and said he had engaged in inappropriate behavior. A no-confidence vote was held last week in the college. Through a university spokesman, Salwasser declined to comment on the committee's work.

In the weeks after the paper's publication, the two leading sponsors of the salvage legislation, Republican Rep. Greg Walden of Oregon and Democratic Rep. Brian Baird of Washington, put Donato on the hot seat at a congressional field hearing in Oregon.

And in a highly unusual move, some senior forestry faculty wrote Science, saying the paper was not fit for publication.

"It certainly was an attempt" at censorship, said Science Editor in Chief Donald Kennedy, who explained that he ran the piece because it offered sound, peer-reviewed research on a subject of "considerable interest."

Kennedy, a former president of Stanford University, pointed to the brief suspension of the research project's funding by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management as part of a broader discord between science and politics. (The funding was reinstated after a Democratic congressman complained and the bureau said it was satisfied with the Donato team's responses to its concerns.)

"I do think there's a kind of attitude in [the Bush] administration that ... prefers to constrain scientists to talk not about their own views and their own conclusions, but to stick to an administration line about many of these issues," Kennedy said.

The paper's critics deny any attempts at censorship and say they are simply reacting to a shoddy, incomplete piece of research.

"The conclusions drawn could not be supported by the data," John Sessions, a distinguished forest engineering professor and one of the senior signatories of the letter to Science, said in an interview last month in his book-lined office on Oregon State's Corvallis campus.

"They broke every rule of responsible conduct in research," he said.

Sessions was the chief author of a 2003 College of Forestry report on the same huge fire in southern Oregon's Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest that Donato studied. Sessions' analysis — commissioned and paid for by Oregon's timber-dependent Douglas County — underpins the salvage legislation with its conclusion that, unless burned trees were logged and the slopes replanted, much of the forest might never return to its former state.

In contrast, two years after the fire, Donato's team found abundant natural regrowth on land that had been left alone and far fewer tree seedlings on plots that had been logged. The researchers also found fallen wood from timber operations that could fuel future fires. From this, they concluded that "post-fire logging, by removing naturally seeded conifers and increasing surface fuel loads, can be counterproductive."

Science is planning to soon publish Sessions' and Rep. Baird's critiques of the paper, along with responses by Donato's team.

"It is inherently flawed as science," said Baird, who holds a doctorate in psychology and formerly taught college statistics. "I have some real concerns with how this study came to be published and how it's been used since publication."

He and Sessions fault the research's statistical sampling techniques and argue the results would have been different if the salvage logging had occurred right after the fire, before seedlings became established, rather than two years later. They further note that just because seedlings sprout after a fire, there's no guarantee of long-term survival.

Amid the tumult, the paper's authors, who include a researcher with the U.S. Forest Service and an Oregon State professor in forest science, have maintained a low profile. They have posted responses to the criticism on the forestry college website but said little to the news media.

"Six independent statisticians have reviewed our data analysis and/or response to Congressman Baird," Joe Fontaine, an Oregon State doctoral student in fisheries and wildlife and one of Donato's co-authors, said in an e-mail. "All have supported our conclusions, while none have agreed with the congressman's analysis."

In the forestry school tug of war between timber and ecology, Donato says he understands both sides.

"A lot of us really consider ourselves to be in the middle," he said. "Certainly we need to understand some of the ecological effects. But we also need wood fiber and need to learn how to extract that. I don't see how the two necessarily have to be separate."

Ironically, he added, the hue and cry over his work has only served to highlight the study.

"I probably wouldn't have gotten half the attention I have, probably not even a quarter of the attention, without the efforts of those guys to try and stop it."

*Times researcher Maloy Moore contributed to this article. Boxall reported from Oregon and Wilson from Los Angeles.*

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