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EARTHKEEPERS

PEOPLE WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR TREES AND FORESTS

Community Advocate

Lynn Jungwirth's tireless efforts have made the voice of rural communities part of the forest policy dialogue.

Story and photos by Jane Braxton Little

When rural communities want their issues persuasively presented to Beltway insiders, no one delivers like Lynn Jungwirth. Articulate and authentic, Jungwirth has been the voice of western timber-based towns for two decades.

Her clarity and steadfast integrity have captured the attention of policymakers across the country, says Mark Rey, former Undersecretary of Agriculture: "Lynn has staked out a place independent from the major combatants — a place that is philosophically independent from environmental organizations and the timber industry. That approach has won her supporters on both sides of the aisle."

Whatever Jungwirth has done, in D.C. or in forests of the West, she has done for community — hers in the little town of Hayfork in northwestern California, and others like it across the country. Although she belongs to the third generation of a western logging family, sawlogs have never

been her goal. It is healthy forests that drive Jungwirth — forests that can provide a healthy economic base for rural towns.

"When the land makes it possible for you to live, you feel differently about it," she says. "We don't want to give up our relationship with the land. We just want a better way to consummate it."

Jungwirth, 61, grew up in a small logging town in Oregon, where her father worked in local sawmills until they closed. After college she married and moved to Hayfork, where her husband Jim's family had been logging the surrounding Shasta-Trinity National Forest for three generations. As public values shifted from logging to conserving public lands, conflicts over the use of national forests throughout the Pacific Northwest began hitting Hayfork in the mid-1980s. Skyrocketing unemployment triggered general social decline, reflected in waves of alcoholism, school truancy, and domestic violence.

Jungwirth worked with other Hayfork women to create a community social services center.

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Lynn Jungwirth's career has been focused on bringing community voices into the national debate.



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Lynn Jungwirth and the Communities Committee of the Seventh American Forest Congress gather outside the Russell Senate Building after holding a Congressional workshop in 1997. It was a first for airing the issues that face rural towns

They developed a domestic-violence hotline, and created a food bank and a children's health program. But Jungwirth soon realized their efforts were simply making poverty tolerable. What they needed to learn, she says, was how to nurture economic development.

She raised some money, leased a vacant storefront on Hayfork's main street, and in 1993 opened the Watershed Research and Training Center. The pioneering enterprise has retrained out-of-work loggers to do stream restoration, wildlife surveys, erosion control, and other ecosystem management. The center attracted PhDs who tracked the social and economic health of communities in Trinity County to help policymakers understand the plight of rural towns.

By the time the 1996 Seventh American Forest Congress convened in Washington, D.C., forest communities across the country were coming together in a movement that quickly recognized Jungwirth as a leader. She served as the first chair of the Communities Committee, focusing on national forest policy changes that would benefit local workers and communities. Those responsibilities launched her frequent trips to Washington, where she testified before numerous Congressional committees and met with federal representatives. It is through these exchanges that Jungwirth established herself as an original and passionate voice for the rural West. She always shows up in the vaunted halls of Congress wearing her trademark hooded gray sweatshirt and blue jeans. For high-class occasions she upgrades to a black velour hooded sweatshirt. Her shoes alternate between white tennis shoes and black.

Jungwirth disarms her audience even before she opens her mouth, says Maia Enzer, policy director at Sustainable Northwest in Portland, Oregon: "She takes away all the pretense. She has no positioning. Lynn speaks the truth. She frames issues in a way that makes you feel there's something you can do to change things."

Jungwirth is open to collaborating with any

set of players that can improve rural communities and their relationship with the forests that surround them. Along with Sustainable Northwest, her partners include AMERICAN FORESTS, the U.S. Forest Service, academics, Sierra Pacific Industries, and environmental groups, among them The Wilderness Society and Sierra Club. Together they have constructed innovative strategies to retain jobs and improve forest health.

Jungwirth's resolute belief in the power of people to get things done is at the heart of her contributions, says Jeff Campbell, former senior program officer with the Ford Foundation, who coordinated grants to forest-based community projects. "She delivers straight talk, no BS. That's courageous."

When standard logging equipment was too cumbersome for single-tree-selection logging, Jungwirth went to local mechanics and asked them to design and build light-on-the-land machinery for small-diameter logs. She helped convince federal officials to experiment with multipurpose timber contracts that emphasize stewardship. To increase forest-based jobs, she pushed for secondary manufacturing that adds value to the product and cash to the local economy. She has introduced experimental equipment from Economizers to portable wood-pellet plants — all, she says, "community-based, community supported, and community sized."

Jungwirth's commitment to rural communities has changed the tenor of national timber politics. An oddity at first, her pragmatic approach to the problems facing forest management spoke to both Republicans and Democrats, says Rey. Hers is now a voice they expect to hear.

Jungwirth would squirm in the face of this attention. For all her successes, she has often stared into the cold eye of failure. She can tick off projects that withered, ideas that faded without blooming. She dismisses them with a wry laugh: "It's always been easy to say 'It's too hard — let a bigger group do it.' Everything changes when you understand that small will get you to big. It's a question of will — the triumph of hope over experience."

Jungwirth is stepping down as executive director of the Watershed Center, but she will always remain a presence in Hayfork. With her feet planted across the fading centerline of the town's main street, arms crossed in her ubiquitous gray sweatshirt, Jungwirth symbolizes the determination of rural communities to survive against the odds. Her message is the inspiration to carry on: We will work with you, whoever you are, and we will work tirelessly. But you will take no more away from our community.

Editor Jane Braxton Little writes from Plumas, CA