

Looking at the News: Reason for Doubt

By Steve Wilent

In the abstract to his superb keynote at the 2018 SAF National Convention in Portland, Oregon, Bob Lackey, a professor of fisheries science at Oregon State University, began with these two sentences:

People typically expect that scientific information provided by interest and advocacy groups is infused with policy preferences, and for many people, the same skepticism exists for media-provided science. Increasingly, however, public skepticism has extended to scientists themselves—i.e., the prevalence of “advocacy masquerading as science.”

“Media-provided science.” In other words, scientific data and the conclusions of scientists explained and interpreted by professional reporters and editors. Professionals, one may hope, who are schooled in the basics of journalism. “Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth,” says the American Press Institute: “This ‘journalistic truth’ is a process that begins with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Then journalists try to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, subject to further investigation.”

For the record, I have degrees in forestry and journalism. In news articles in *The Forestry Source*, associate editor Andrea Watts and I believe that our first obligation is to the truth. We also rely on our readers to point out errors or incomplete information—we welcome constructive criticism.

This is because professional journalists, even at the most highly regarded media outlets, sometimes make errors or present incomplete information. Here are some recent examples of why it pays to be skeptical of news articles.

In “The Amazon Rainforest Is on Fire. Climate Scientists Fear a Tipping Point Is Near,” in the *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 2019, staff writer Julia Rosen wrote that scientists are worried about “a dramatic increase in illegal deforestation that could deprive the world of a critical buffer against climate change.” To illustrate this point, the *Times* offered the chart in Figure 1A, which compares deforestation in the Amazon over only two years, from January through August, 2018 and 2019. The chart does indeed show dramatic increases in deforestation. In “Amazon Rainforest Fires: Here’s What’s Really Happening,” August 23, 2019, the *New York Times*, to its credit, provided a chart showing deforestation over 31 years, from 1998 to 2018 (Figure 1B), which tells a very different story: Per this chart, deforestation has fallen dramatically since 2004. Whether 2019 will be a record year remains to be seen.

This is not to suggest that deforestation in the Amazon isn’t an important issue—it is. But why did the *Los Angeles Times*, a world-class newspaper, provide a chart that was so misleading?

Here’s another example. In an August 21 article about the fires in Brazil, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) pub-

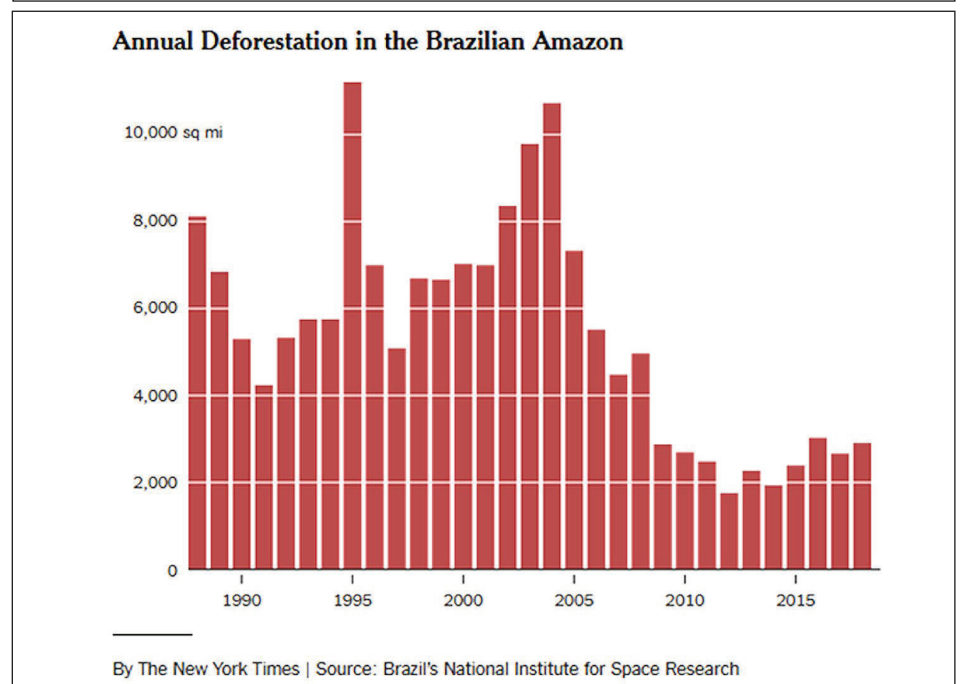
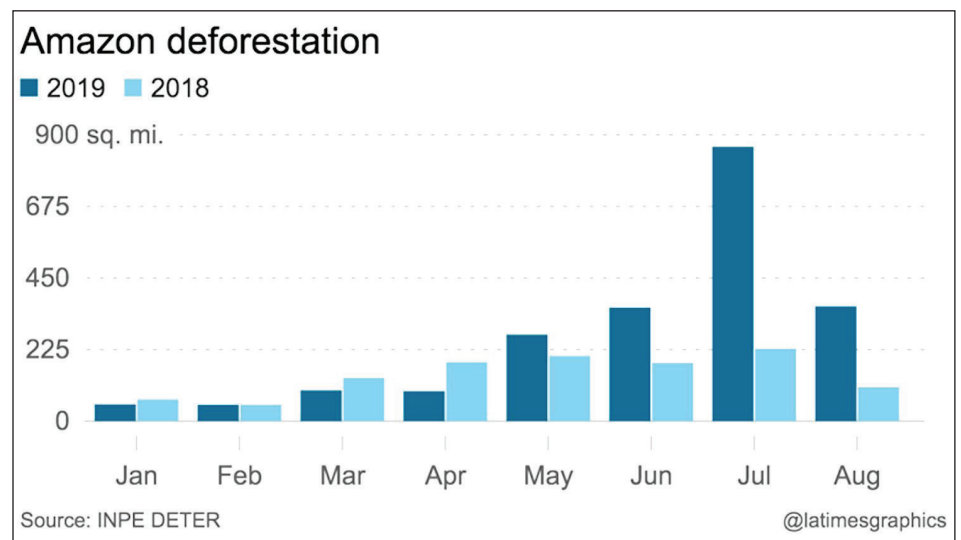


Figure 1A: from the *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 2019. Figure 1B: from the *New York Times*, August 23, 2019.

lished the chart shown in Figure 2A, with “This year has seen more than double the number of fires in Brazil than in 2013” as the title. Although the data in the chart may be correct, these, too, are misleading. On August 23, Global Forest Watch reported that “This year is not on track to be record-breaking—but it is relatively high compared to recent years,” and backed up that claim with the chart in Figure 2B, with data from 2001 to 2019.

Did the BBC select the date range to fit a story with a sensational headline, “Amazon Fires Increase by 84% in One Year—Space Agency”?

One more example: Several articles in January 2019 claimed that there has been a surge or spike in US carbon emissions. For example, the headline of a January 8 article in the *New York Times* was “US Carbon Emissions Surged in 2018 Even as Coal Plants Closed.” The title of an article published on the same day in the *Washington Post* was “US Greenhouse Gas Emissions Spiked in 2018—and It Couldn’t Happen at a Worse Time.” The article, citing preliminary data from the US Energy Information Administration and other sources, stated that US emissions “likely [rose] 2.5 percent in 2018.”

However, a look at the chart the *Post*

included in the article offers a very different picture, once again by presenting data over a longer time frame (Figure 3). Although the chart is of energy-related emissions, it notes that these constitute nearly three-quarters of all US emissions. A glance at the chart shows that energy-related emissions have fallen, and fallen dramatically, since 2009. The chart also shows that “spikes” have occurred in several years since then. What’s more, the trend line shows that emissions overall have not only declined, but also that the US may be on track to meeting the Paris Agreement targets.

Would “US Greenhouse Gas Emissions Spiked in 2018—But US Still on Course to Meeting Paris Agreement Target” have been a reasonable headline?

In all of these examples, it is quite likely that the reporters and editors simply didn’t understand the data they had to work with. On the other hand, perhaps they knew very well what they were doing. Maybe they were seeking to sell more newspapers or generate social media buzz (and there was a lot of it, especially about the fires in the Amazon). Or they may have accepted “advocacy masquerading as science” without questioning it. In any case, these examples demonstrate the value of

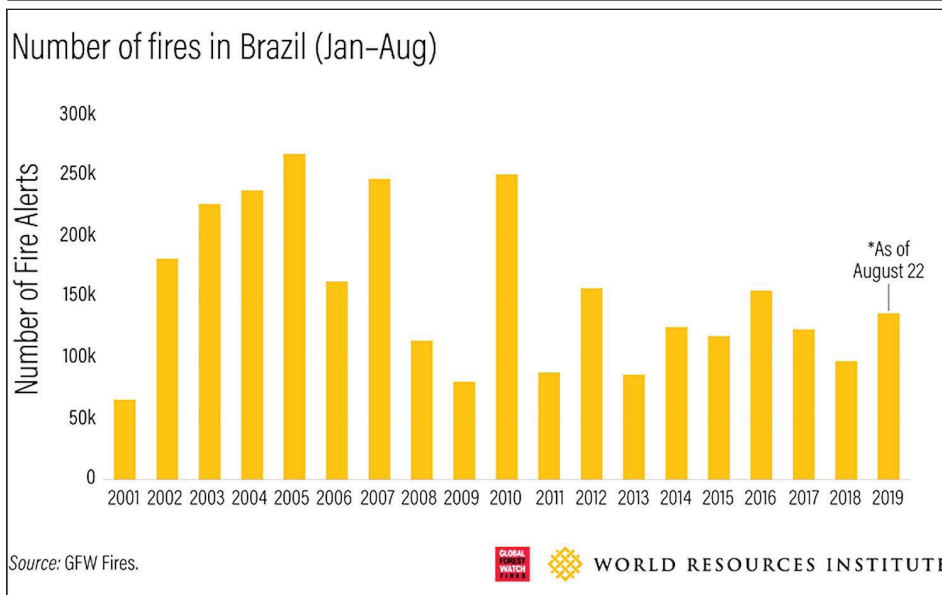
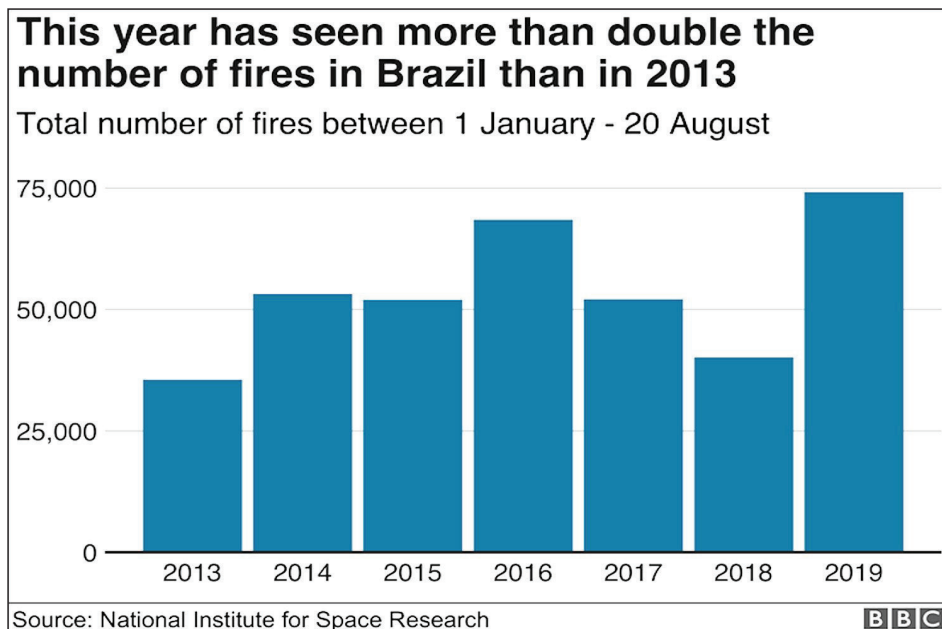


Figure 2A: From the BBC, August 21, 2019. Figure 2B: From the Global Forest Watch, August 23, 2019.

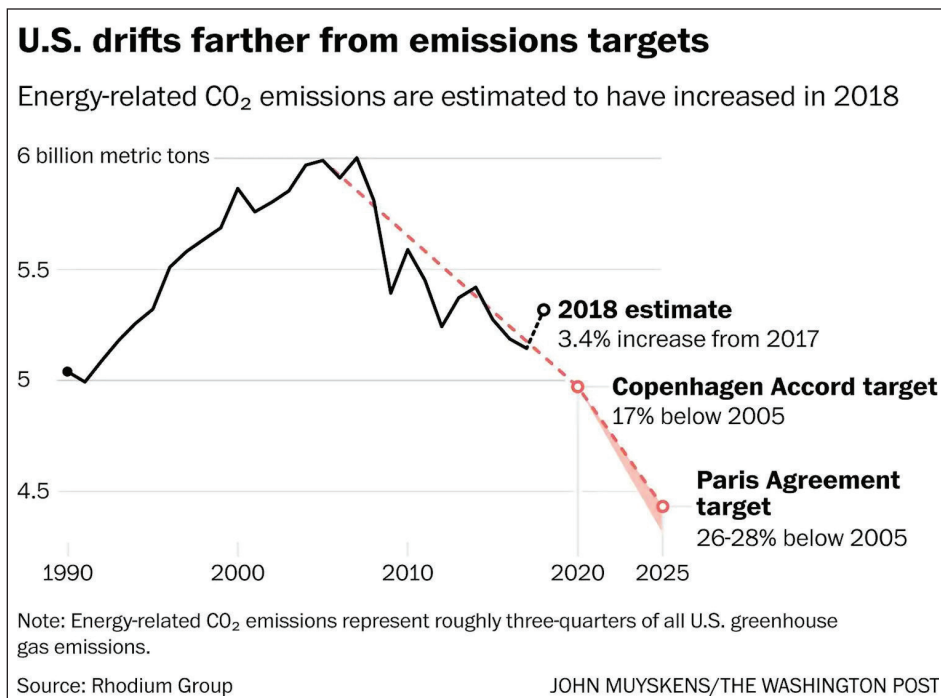


Figure 3: From the Washington Post, January 8, 2019.

skepticism when it comes to the news.

One of Merriam Webster's definitions of skeptic is "A person who questions or doubts something (such as a claim or statement): a person who often questions or doubts things." Also: "unwillingness to believe without conclusive evidence." One may be skeptical of some claims about climate change without denying that climate change is occurring. Skeptics are naturally inclined to dig deeper into news articles, check the sources of data cited (including those in *The Forestry Source*), and question the pronouncements of politicians, pundits, and bloggers, as well as the methods, data, and conclusions of scientists.

Robert K. Merton, "one of the most influential sociologists of the 20th century," according to the *New York Times*, once wrote that "Most institutions demand unqualified faith; but the institution of science makes skepticism a virtue." Journalists, too, ought to see skepticism as a virtue.

We need more skeptics, particularly when it comes to assessing claims made through the news media. That goes for foresters and all natural-resources professionals, who often find themselves trying to help non-skeptics see beyond the headlines. Indeed, we foresters have an obligation to do so. **FS**