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Congress delays timber decision

WASHINGTON (AP) — A House-Senate conference committee on Wednesday delayed for one day consideration of legislation to ensure Northwest mills an adequate timber supply over the next year while providing some protection for the region's old-growth forests.

The Northwest's old-growth forests provide a primary habitat for the northern spotted owl.

The delay came as Northwest lawmakers sought a compromise that would head off a showdown in the conference committee and a possible House floor fight.

House members from Oregon and Washington believe that while they may have the votes to prevail in a conference committee, they must not offend Illinois Democratic Rep. Sidney Yates if they are to win on the floor.

Yates chairs the House interior appropriations subcommittee and has played a pivotal role in the negotiations. He said Wednesday he remained hopeful of a compromise.

"We're putting the tough issues over until tomorrow," said Yates, who chairs the conference committee with West Virginia Sen. Robert Byrd.

Yates said he received a telephone call from House Speaker Tom Foley on Wednesday during which the Spokane Democrat explained the need for a temporary truce in the battle over the Northwest's old-growth forests.

Foley would prefer to avoid a messy floor fight over a regional issue and has been supportive of the compromise talks.

"I feel we made a little progress, but there are no agreements," said Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Wash. "I hate to be vague, but it's a vague situation."

Among the major sticking points were the level of timber sales planned in the region over

the next year, proposed limits on federal court appeals of those timber sales, language directing federal agencies to start protecting spotted owl habitat and the definition of old-growth forests.

"I don't think there are any real hangups, but the problem is there is nothing firm on the table," said Sen. Mark Hatfield, R-Ore.

Yates has been critical of severe restrictions on timber sales appeals and also wants to make sure that a federal court suit in Seattle, which challenges the U.S. Forest Service's spotted owl habitat management plan, is allowed to proceed.

Northwest lawmakers believe that if the Forest Service management plan were to be overturned by Judge William Dwyer, virtually all logging in the region's national forests would be halted.

They have proposed that Congress deem the Forest Service plan "sufficient," but are also considering ordering the Forest Service to take another look at its management plan.

Either way, lawmakers believe they could forestall a ruling in the case.

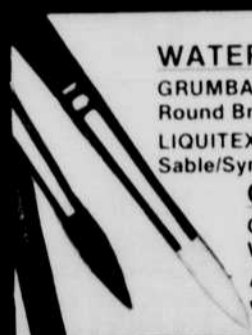
With a U.S. Fish and Wildlife decision on whether to designate the spotted owl as a threatened species roughly a year off, lawmakers have been searching for a way to ensure the region's mills of a steady supply of timber over the next 12 months.

Environmentalists want to see the owl protected and logging in the old-growth forest halted. They have won a string of court victories that at one point halted roughly half the timber sales planned in the region's federal forests during the current fiscal year.

Lawmakers insist that without restrictions on judicial review, the environmentalists could continue to tie up timber sales and mills would start to close.

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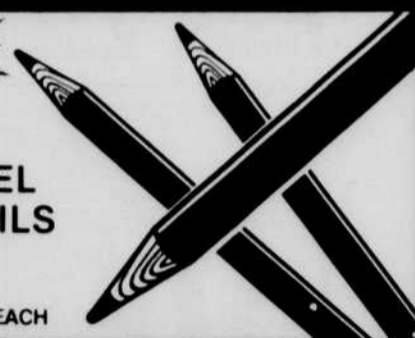
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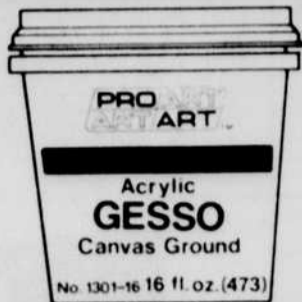
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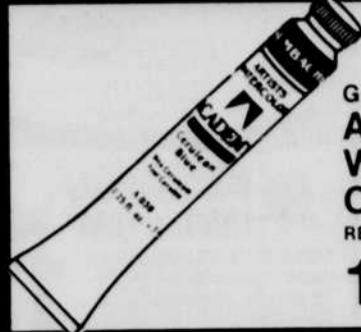
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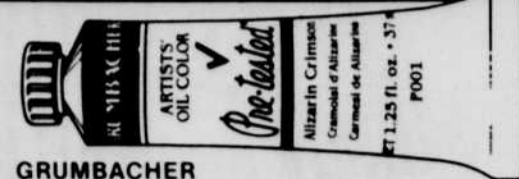
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