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**Timber translations needed**



WASHINGTON (AP) — When leaders of foreign countries meet, much care is taken to accurately translate terms and phrases that carry a loaded meaning for one

side or the other. Likewise, when President Clinton convenes a conference on the use of federal forests Friday in Portland, he'll hear what may sound like a foreign language.

There'll be talk of the God Squad, the Gang of Four, indicator species, critical habitat and stumpers like sufficiency language.

That's the language that has evolved in the long-simmering dispute over whether loggers should be allowed to cut trees in federal forests where northern spotted owls live.

Perhaps most importantly, sprinkled throughout the testimony will be countless references to "certainty." The problem? Nobody agrees on what that means.

"When you talk in generalities, everyone agrees. It's different when you start putting lines on paper," said Rep. Bruce Vento, D-Minn., chairman of the House Natural Resources subcommittee on forests and public lands.

To environmentalists, certainty means assurances that the old-growth forests will be protected against logging.

To the timber industry, it means they'll be allowed to cut enough trees to meet demands for lumber and wood products.

And to workers, it means a promise they still will have a job in the forest or the saw mills.

During a briefing for about 30 members of Congress earlier this month, Vice President Al Gore said that the Clinton administration advocates "certainty."

But is he talking the same language as lawmakers from the Northwest?

"I'm not sure that they are," said Sen. Slade Gorton, R-Wash. "By the time they are finished, I hope they mean the same thing by certainty as we do."

For Northwest lawmakers, talk about "certainty" means that any legislation regulating use of the region's forests must include "sufficiency language" — another buzz phrase.

Such language in a bill would have the effect of

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— Rep. Bruce Vento, D-Minn.

insulating the legislation from certain court challenges, an idea vigorously opposed by environmentalists.

For example, any bill to resolve the dispute will likely divide the region, allowing logging in some areas and banning it in others. Timber industry leaders are most concerned that even in the areas approved for logging, environmentalists would file lawsuits to block the activity.

Sufficiency language would say the bill's protections are sufficient to meet all other existing laws.

If outsiders can master multiple views on "certainty" and jargon like "sufficiency language," stuff like the God Squad, the Gang of Four and the critical habitat of indicator species ought to be easy.

Here's some help.

The God Squad is really the Endangered Species Committee, nicknamed because it can exempt a creature from the Endangered Species Act and allow it to become extinct if the cost of saving it is too great.

The Gang of Four is a committee of four scientists who gave Congress the most recent data on the condition of old-growth forests, home to the spotted owl.

Critical habitat is the area designated essential to the existence of a creature, in this case the spotted owl. Anyone who wants to conduct commercial activity, including logging, on land declared a critical habitat must first get permission from the Fish and Wildlife Service.

And an indicator species, like the spotted owl, is kind of like a canary in the coal mine. Because it's at the top of the food chain, its health is an early warning of the overall health of other life in the forest.

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