

USFS has stepped up its reduction of forest fuels

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doesn't mean components of the bill won't pass as part of a larger package," said Travis Joseph, president of the American Forest Resources Council, in Portland, a prime driver among 170 organizations backing the bill. The budget deal passed by the House, Oct. 28, makes possible a continuing resolution or omnibus appropriations package in December that could include the heart of HR 2647, he said.

Chances for CEs

The administration wants the fire-fighting funding issue fixed and larger categorical exclusions, known as "CEs," of the National Environmental Policy Act for forest management have the best chance of passing with it, Joseph said.

The exclusions exempt certain practices from the lengthy environmental reviews normally required.

The administration approved CEs on up to 2,500 acres in the 2014 Farm Bill and USFS has used them, said Nick Smith, executive director of Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities, in Portland.

Extending CEs to 5,000 acres and even up to 15,000 acres where projects are collaboratively developed by all groups concerned, "are the heart of the bill," said Smith, a top Republican aide in the Oregon Legislature before forming Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities in 2013.

CEs of 5,000 to 15,000 acres seem small when compared with 60 million to 80 million acres of federal forests nationwide that Smith says are at risk of wildfire, insects or disease. The USFS is only able, he said, to treat 5 percent of that annually.

But Joseph said 5,000 to 15,000 acres actually are "pretty substantial" compared with USFS current practices of treating only 200 acres in a project.

"Depending on funding, it can take a couple of years to complete projects and they can take up to 250 pages of environmental review. This isn't about taking away environmental protections, but making them faster and more efficient," said Joseph, formerly a senior policy adviser to Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore.

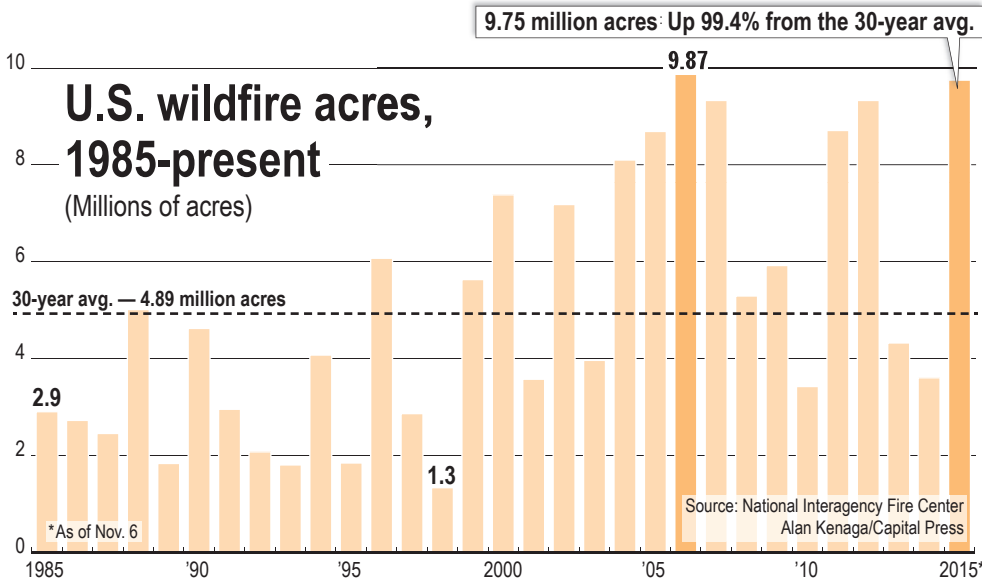
Harvest levels dropped

The USFS harvests about 2.5 billion board feet of timber annually compared with 8 billion to 12 billion annually in the 1960s and '70s. It's 90 percent less than it was 20 years ago in the Pacific Northwest, Joseph said.

Harvests dropped dramatically because of "well intentioned but conflicting regulations," but also "federal forest analysis paralysis by real or perceived threats of litigation," Smith said.

There's also the sheer cost of about \$356 million annually for USFS to meet National Environmental Policy Act requirements for projects, he said.

"The USFS is chronically cash starved, going over budget and not having the budget to manage these lands," Smith said. "It would take decades if not centuries for the USFS to catch up (in forest management),



Courtesy of Nicole Kuchenbuch/Haeberle Ranch
Black Angus cattle being herded home to Haeberle Ranch off Funk Mountain near Conconully, Wash., Oct. 25. The ranch has rescued 72 pair since the Okanogan fire in August.



Courtesy of USFS
Part of the forest devastation of Black Canyon fire, north of Lake Chelan, Wash., as seen in September. Large landscapes of the West burned in wildfires this year.

but it doesn't have the resources."

As a result of a decline in forest management and timber harvested, there's a build up of underbrush and thick timber fueling larger and larger wildfires, Smith and Joseph said.

"We need to look at forests more holistically, like landscapes, to make forests more healthy again and agencies need the tools and dollars to do that," Joseph said.

The bill would benefit rural communities not only in reducing fire fuels but in restoring mills and jobs, he said.

Encouraging USFS to act

"Sixty (million) to 80 million acres is a pretty steep hill to climb," Smith said. "The sooner Congress acts on these types of reforms the better."

It also will take, he said, encouraging the USFS to use its new authority for larger CEs once it gets it. Unlike, prior legislation, HR 2647 does not mandate logging, but allows the USFS to do it. The Restoring Healthy Forests for Healthy Communities Act passed the House in late 2013, but died in the Senate because environmentalists labeled it a logging mandate bill, Smith said. He disagreed that what it was, pointing out logging was required only with certain criteria met.

Joseph said a provision of HR 2647 not likely to make it is one requiring any outside litigants to post a bond before they can sue to halt a

project that's been developed with collaboration of all interested parties.

The bill is backed by the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the National Association of Realtors, the National Association of Home Builders, the National Association of Counties and many tribes, forest industry associations, water groups, wildlife groups and recreationists.

The USFS has stepped up its reduction of forest fuels, increasing timber harvests 18 percent since 2008 and treating 4.6 million acres for fuel reduction in 2014, the most in one year, USFS Chief Tom Tidwell told the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry on Oct. 8.

The subcommittee's hearing reviewed the 2015 fire season and longterm wildfire trends.

Tidwell testified the agency needs to keep increasing the amount of acreage it is treating and said 20 projects this year were a result of new authorities from the 2014 Farm bill. He said 16 projects were being litigated, but a bigger problem was lack of bids for 50 sales.

Rod Haeberle, owner of Haeberle Ranch, Conconully, Wash., told the subcommittee lack of bids was due to far fewer sawmills in Washington because of the spotted owl endangered species listing years ago. A steady, reliable level of public sales is needed, he said.

This year, USFS firefighting costs reached a record high, topping \$1.7 billion. Thirteen wildland firefighters died. The USFS dealt with 54,493 wildfires that burned 9.7 million acres, mostly in the West, according to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise.

It was only the fourth year since 1960 that more than 9 million acres burned. The record was 9.8 million in 2006. Just 3.2 million acres burned in 2014.

Rancher sentiment

A common opinion among ranchers and timber owners across the West is that wildfires get huge because public lands aren't logged or thinned and firefighters often use defensive rather than offensive tactics.

The sentiment is summarized by a big sign that went up in Colville, Wash., last spring: "Public lands. Log it, graze it or watch it burn."

"Graze it. Don't blaze it" is a slogan in Idaho, said Wyatt Prescott, executive vice president of the Idaho Cattle Association in Boise.

He said he supports anything that streamlines management of resource lands that is too encumbered with rules and regulations.

Compounding the problem, Prescott said, is agencies contemplating what litigation may force them to do.

HR 2647 seems too small and focused on forests, he said. Similar application is needed for greater

grazing on BLM lands to keep grass and sod fuels down and he's working toward that end, he said.

Idaho ranchers said better grazing management would have reduced the size and severity of the Soda fire that scorched 279,000 acres in Owyhee County and part of Eastern Oregon.

Sod was so thick in Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife grasslands from 20 years of no cattle grazing, that it took bulldozers two and three passes to cut fire lines to soil, Nicole Kuchenbuch, Haeberle's daughter, said in last summer's 133,450-acre Okanogan fire.

Like other ranches impacted by western fires, the Haeberle-Kuchenbuch Ranch is still searching for missing cattle and dealing with loss of grazing lands that's causing some to downsize herds. Ranchers' livelihoods have been severely hurt by wildfire.

The Okanogan and closely neighboring Tunk Block and North Star fires totaled 517,506 of the 1,102,209 acres burned in Washington in 2015.

Frustration and skepticism

Steve Lorz, vice president of Okanogan County Farm Bureau and a former logger, said HR 2647 sounds like a step in the right direction but "only a teaspoon in the ocean" of need.

Even if it passes probably nothing will be done with it, he said.

A large amount of blow down timber was wasted for environmental reasons on the last USFS harvest he worked on two years ago, he said.

"To me they (USFS) have proven for 30 years that they are not able to do anything because basically they are prostitutes to the environmental movement. They throw away millions of board feet of timber and are damn proud of it," Lorz said.

Smith said he hears a high level of frustration from many people in forest communities over the USFS inability to remove high fuel loads from forests.

"Over the last 25 years," Smith said, "these communities have been hit hard by fewer logging jobs and now we're seeing the environmental consequences from declining management where heavy fuel loads are fueling larger and more severe wildfires that destroy not only public forest lands but private timber lands and homes, watersheds, wildlife habitat and recreation lands."

'The likelihood of developing another container service in Oregon is unlikely'

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"We are getting closer to a cliff," he said.

For now, though, shippers are "coping" by using trucks and trains to send goods to ports in Seattle and Tacoma, Smith said.

Bill Wyatt, executive director of the Port of Portland, said the longshoremen's union, ICTSI Oregon and the port are still engaged in litigation but they're also in "significant conversations" and he's more optimistic about a resolution than six to eight months ago.

Ocean carriers are looking for a signal from ILWU that they're "welcome to return" to

Portland, at which point they're likely to renew container service at the port, Wyatt said.

While the Port of Portland's container terminal doesn't generate large revenues, it was a profitable niche for Hanjin — a major trans-Pacific carrier — until the work slowdowns began, he said. "It is a lucrative market for the right carrier."

Until container service is restored to Portland, it's possible that agricultural shippers in Eastern Oregon and Idaho will be helped by reconfiguring the transport of goods from Lewiston, Idaho.

When the container terminal was fully operational, barges moved product from Lewiston

to Portland for loading onto ocean liners, but that service has now fallen apart, Wyatt said.

The problem may be mitigated by transloading goods sent on barges from Lewiston onto trains in Boardman, Ore., for shipment to Tacoma, he said.

During the legislative hearing, the possibility of expanding Oregon ports in Coos Bay or Newport to accommodate containers was discussed, but Wyatt said this wasn't a realistic alternative due to huge investment involved.

"The likelihood of developing another container service in Oregon is unlikely because

the capital cost is immense," he said.

A research team, part of the state's response to the Hanjin container shipping company ending its calls at Portland this year, last week presented six recommendations during a meeting of stakeholders in Wilsonville.

The initiatives are the result of an effort involving Business Oregon, the Port of Portland, the state departments of agriculture and transportation, and multiple producers and shippers. The recommendations include:

- Establishing a port trucker information system to consolidate and streamline the flow of traffic.

- Truck driver training to expand the pool of available drivers.
 - Building satellite container yards to speed up the drop-off, pickup process.
 - Expanding cold storage facilities for imports, which could make more refrigerated containers available for Oregon exporters.
 - Building new rail intermodal yards to add flexibility to rail and truck container traffic.
 - Monitoring Columbia River rail and barge service linking Lewiston, Wash., and Boardman, Ore., and be prepared to provide additional public financial support as it expands.
- About 19 percent of export

containers shipped out of the Pacific Northwest carry agricultural products, according to the port. Rerouting containers to the Seattle area from Portland increases the shipping cost by \$500 to \$1,000 per container, according to a trade and logistics fact sheet prepared for state officials.

"The loudest screams are not about added cost, but about goods that are not moving," said Dan Smith of the Tioga Group Inc., a California consulting company hired to assess the situation. "If they don't move the goods, they're not in business."

Reporter Eric Mortenson contributed to this report.

FDA estimates rule compliance will cost farmers about \$366 million a year over 10 years

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their employees on good hygiene practices and ensure their equipment doesn't contaminate produce.

The rule does not apply to produce rarely eaten raw or that undergoes commercial processing that eliminates the presence of micro-organisms.

Farms that have an average annual value of produce sales over the past three years of \$25,000 or less are exempt.

States can apply for a variance from some requirements

for certain crops.

The rule requires food importers to ensure that foreign produce is grown in a way that meets the same safety standards as domestic produce.

FDA estimates compliance with the rule will cost U.S. farmers about \$366 million a year over 10 years.

Gombas said industry's main concern with the rule is the water testing requirements.

Farmers who receive their

agricultural water from municipal sources don't have to test and farmers who use groundwater will have to test once a year.

But growers who use surface water will have to initially test their water for generic E. coli 20 times over the course of two to four years to establish the farm's "microbial water quality profile."

The farms will have to conduct a minimum of five tests a year after that.

The rule requires those

farms to calculate a geometric mean and statistical threshold value to ensure their water doesn't exceed maximum bacterial standards.

"I was a math minor and I still don't know how to do any of that stuff," Gombas said.

But the FDA did alter the water rules to address concerns of farmers whose irrigation water cannot meet the standards.

The final rule includes a provision that allows farmers whose water exceeds the bac-

terial standards to meet the criteria if they can show that bacteria dies off their produce at a certain rate between the last irrigation period and harvest or between harvest and the end of storage.

This "die-off" provision is a huge improvement from FDA's original proposal, which could have put bulb onion growers in Idaho and Oregon who use surface water out of business, said Kay Riley, chairman of the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Onion Committee.

"The rule is onerous, there's

no question about it, and it will change the way we do things and it will add expense," he said. "But the original rule would have put us out of business. We have a rule we can live with and I think we should be happy with that."

Farms with \$25,000 to \$250,000 in average annual produce sales have four years to comply with the rule, businesses with \$250,000 to \$500,000 in sales have three years and all other farms have two years.