Editorials are written by or approved by members of the Capital Press Editorial Board.

All other commentary pieces are the opinions of the authors but not necessarily this newspaper.

Opinion

Our View

Forest management needs congressional fix

The time has come for Congress to provide the legal and financial tools the U.S. Forest Service needs to better manage the 188.4 million acres of national forests.

For decades the Forest Service did a world-class job of managing national forests under the multiple-use doctrine.

Then, under the Clinton administration and now under the Obama administration, management of the national forests shifted to a doctrine of benign neglect, as timber sales and grazing tapered off and catastrophic wildfires multiplied.

This year 54,493 wildfires burned 9.1 million acres of national forests, and the Forest Service spent $1.7 billion fighting them.

As the understory became clogged with brush, logging slowed to a crawl and grazing was reduced, the forests became overstocked with fuels.

Here's the problem facing Congress. The nation's taxpayers are not only stuck with the bill for putting out the fires, but the money is taken out of the budget used for clearing brush and treating areas that are vulnerable to wildfires.

The result has been a cycle of bigger wildfires and smaller budgets aimed at preventing them.

A proposal in the U.S. House offers a starting point for breaking this cycle of neglect.

The Resilient Federal Forest Act of 2015, HR 2647, would allow the Forest Service to get money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to fight wildfires. That only makes sense because wildfires are by definition a disaster.

The bill also eases the yoke of environmental overkill that the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management struggle with as they try to manage forests to prevent wildfires, insect infestations and disease.

The agencies are currently hobbled by federal laws that require expensive environmental reviews. HR 2647 would exclude from National Environmental Policy Act review parts of projects in areas up to 15,000 acres, allowing them to proceed without unnecessary and expensive delays.

"Depending on funding, it can take a couple of years to complete projects and they can take up to 250 pages of environmental review," said Nick Smith, executive director of Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities. The Forest Service alone spends $356 million a year to jump through NEPA-created hoops.

"This isn't about taking away environmental protections, but making them faster and more efficient," said Travis Joseph, president of the American Forest Resources Council, one of 170 organizations that support the legislation.

When it comes to reducing wildfire threats, timber harvests are part of the picture. About 2.5 billion board feet are logged each year in national forests. That's down from 8 billion to 12 billion board feet in the 1960s and 1970s.

Though the bill has passed the House, its future in the Senate is less than certain. The current thinking is that it can be included in other legislation that Congress needs to pass before adjourning at the end of the year.

Congress has a choice. It can either pass this legislation, or a variation of it, or it can do nothing. If it chooses to pass the legislation and President Obama signs it, the Forest Service can more effectively manage national forests.

If Congress chooses not to pass the bill, you can count on finding more signs similar to one seen recently in the Northwest: "Public lands. Log it, graze it or watch it burn."

Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

Our View

Sweetener battle moves back to court of public opinion

The sugar and corn sweetener industries have settled their legal disputes out of court, averting a public judgment that could have dealt either, or perhaps both, a crushing blow.

The opponents having stepped back from the abyss, it's unclear how they will deal with their differences moving forward.

As Americans have become more health-conscious, the sweetener industries have had harder times. That's particularly true of processors of high fructose corn syrup, whose critics have linked it to an increase in childhood obesity and metabolic disorders.

After the makers of high fructose corn syrup tried to rebrand their product as "corn sugar," sugar processors filed a $1.5 billion lawsuit claiming they lost money when corn refiners launched a "sugar is sugar" ad campaign that stated, "Your body can't tell the difference."

Big Corn countered with a $530 million suit, alleging sugar processors had made false and misleading statements about high fructose corn syrup. Among other things, the suit claims the sugar industry suggested high fructose corn syrup is as addictive as crack cocaine. It also claims that the sugar industry is behind the studies that link high fructose corn syrup with obesity.

Sugar and corn have never gotten along as they have battled for market share. Sugar notes that corn is highly subsidized, users of sweeteners point to the government sugar program that restricts imports and keeps domestic prices high.

From the beginning both suits were problematic.

Sugar has always maintained that it is different and superior to high fructose corn syrup. The science is a little less clear-cut.

Sugar is sucrose, which is half fructose, half glucose. High fructose corn syrup is typically 55 percent fructose and 45 percent glucose.

If a jury were to rule that sugar is sugar, and that your body can't tell the difference, it would be a disaster for Big Sugar. A loss for Big Corn, on the other hand, would taint high fructose corn syrup.

These were cases neither side could afford to lose. A public airing of perceived negative aspects attached to both products could also have proven a public relations problem for each, perhaps making them cases neither could afford to win.

Terms of the settlement have not been made public. In a joint statement, corn and sugar said they are committed to "practices that encourage safe and healthful use of their products, including moderation in the consumption of table sugar, high fructose corn syrup and other sweeteners."

After four years of legal wrangling, they had to say something.

It seems to us that Big Sugar and Big Corn are happy to play to the ever-changing views of the court of public opinion rather than risk a more definitive and damaging verdict in federal district court.

Our View

Ecology shows it is listening to dairy operators

To the relief of dairymen, the Washington Department of Ecology appears to be backing away from a draconian proposal that could have bankrupted small dairies.

While the results aren't perfect, we have to applaud the agency for listening to reason.

The department is in the process of rewriting water pollution rules for confined animal feeding operations, or CAFOs.

DOE has proposed regulating manure lagoons in a fashion similar to industrial plants that discharge wastewater, which would greatly expand the number of operations that would need permits. The agency says the rules are necessary to protect groundwater.

As part of that equation, DOE maintained that all manure lagoons without synthetic liners leak and add to groundwater pollution, even clay-lined lagoons built to Natural Resources Conservation Service standards.

Under the proposal, only lagoons with synthetic liners would have been exempt from obtaining a permit.

DOE planned to extend the protection to groundwater and has tentatively proposed that any producer with an unlined manure lagoon obtain a CAFO permit.

Dairymen balked at being placed under expensive regulation without proof their lagoon was polluting. While regulatory costs hit all operations hard, they would have proven particularly troublesome for the small dairies that are common in Western Washington.

But the DOE has backed off.

The department likely will assume the burden of proof to document groundwater pollution at individual farms before requiring a producer to obtain a confined animal feeding operation permit, a shift in position from the DOE's tentative proposal.

It will also likely exempt small dairies from the rule. Though it has not yet defined "small," the department estimates about a quarter of the state's smallest dairies would be exempt.

It's a start.

DOE plans to announce a formal proposal early next year and have a final rule in place by mid-year.

Washington dairymen warily await the details. Even with the changes DOE has discussed, the regulations are formidable. But the changes are evidence that the department is listening, and could be swayed further.

Readers' views

Urbanites already have access to Owyhee lands

I'm becoming increasingly concerned we are going to end up visitors to areas our families have freely accessed since settling in Eastern Oregon. Regulated at every turn we choose to take.

For as long as I can remember, rumors and side conversations have made allusions — China holds our public lands and resources as collateral against loans. Something is wrong when our nation, arguably one of the richest on earth, is held hostage by approximately $20 trillion of debt. National debt is a topic way off my path, so I will move on. (I know everyone is waiting for me to mention roads.)

Coming away from the public meeting in Adrian, on the latest threat of over 2 million acres being signed into a monument, I've switched my attention to a coalition between the green machine Oregon Natural Desert Association, Pew Charitable Trust and Sierra Club joining with recreation-based businesses such as Keen Footwear. These are some of the principals, but not all, pushing the Owyhee monument.

Is it about saving the canyonlands or selling more sandals to fill the coffers of private companies? Self-serving coalitions with no interests in the negative impacts imposed on the local population, resulting in families being displaced. No recreationists are being held back from enjoying the Owyhee Canyonlands at the present time. Monument designation would protect the environment from more people, yet the term monument itself makes it seem grander and generates more interest.

If you were to believe the 30-minute presentation from Oregon Natural Desert Association, everyone comes out a winner. Access would remain, but they failed to mention closing the scores of spur roads locals have historically used for sustenance. They failed to mention grazing will be negatively affected. Economic values from the mineral resources would be lost. Our rural communities would be blessed with the tourism dollars. Urbanites all decked out in their subtle "look at me" attire could breeze in, spend a few days and dollars, and be gone just as they are free to do presently.

Is it hard to understand — we are not for sale, our historical cultural access is not for sale. We are doing just fine without your money.

A week after the meeting in Adrian, across the Internet comes the article, Presidential Memorandum, "mitigating impacts on natural resources from development and encouraging related private investment." Encouraging related private investment, what in the world does this mean? The term "invest" means putting money in business etc., in order to get a profit. I shake my head, but this sounds like our public lands are for sale. One of the claims in the document is to "protect the health of our economy and environment." This is a general term that can and will be used to implement more redundant regulations from out of control bureaucratic agencies.

Will people push back? I hope so. Nothing has worked to stop the land grabs swirling around us. We desperately need representatives to serve the people they represent, be our voice at the table. Playing politics has not been a winning hand. Time to quit bargaining away the very items you are entrusted to protect.

Wanda Ballard
Baker City, Ore.