

BETTER DEAD THAN GONE

Rep. Walden pushes for dead tree removal and replanting

The state of Oregon currently faces 14 fires, affecting nearly 180,000 acres, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. When the fire season is over, some of what's left is dead, burned trees.

But what happens to those burned trees?

Eastern Oregon Rep. Greg Walden is urging the U.S. Senate to adopt the House's version of the 2018 Farm Bill, which would remove burned, dead trees from public lands "while they still have value and replant" forest — just like private timberlands do.

It's common sense, Walden says, in an email newsletter to constituents.

That's a problematic strategy, according to Dominick DellaSala, president and chief scientist at Geos Institute in Ashland.

He and two other colleagues worked on a paper that was published in a peer-reviewed journal in 2016. The article examined 1,500 fires from 1984 to 2014. The data suggest that areas with the most logging actually had the highest fire severity. In other words, forest fires were more likely to happen where logging occurred — such as on private lands.

Burned trees and dead trees play an important role for the ecosystem, he says, providing shade for future trees and supporting the biology around it.

DellaSala also says that Walden is trying to allow timber companies to cut down mature, more fire-resistant trees that didn't burn when cleaning up burned trees.

Previously, Walden tried to do something similar, though on a smaller scale. He introduced the Scenic Columbia Gorge Restoration Act in 2017 after the Eagle Creek Fire.

The real tragedy, DellaSala says, wasn't the fire — because it was going to play an important role in the rebirth of the area. It was Walden's attempt to clear out the burned trees.

Walden's bill didn't get traction in the legislative process.

Nick Cady, legal director at Cascadia Wildlands, says part of the reason that there is fire severity in the Pacific Northwest is due to private tree farms, which Walden says is the model to follow.

Logging on private lands in western Oregon is typically followed by replanting with the maximum number of trees. Timber companies typically replant 600 to 800 trees per acre — five times more than a natural forest, Cady says.

Most of the bigger fires Oregon has seen have been around these private plantations, Cady adds.

The elephant in the room, DellaSala adds, is climate change — and it's something Walden doesn't acknowledge in his letter to the U.S. Senate. In fact, the League of Conservation Voters, an environmental group, rates Walden as a legislator with a poor climate change voting record.

No matter how good policy is when it comes to managing forestland, the ever-changing climate will continue to spark forest fires. In addition, post-fire logging adds carbon dioxide, which contributes to climate change. Both Cady and DellaSala agree that, as summers get drier and hotter, climate change will be a constant that will make wildfires a reality.

Forests do come back if we let them, DellaSala says. But logging while trees "still have value," as Walden mentioned, will make things worse.

Eugene Weekly requested comment from Walden, but his staff did not respond. In his 2018 campaign, he has received \$48,330 so far in contributions from forestry and forest product companies, according to OpenSecrets, a nonpartisan group that tracks money in U.S. politics. ■



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