

Bill offers hope for forest fuel reduction

Measure would change funding for firefighting, ease rules on logging and thinning

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

As ranchers throughout the West deal with the aftermath of catastrophic summer wildfires, proponents of legislation to reduce fuel loads in federal forests say there's a good chance it will pass Congress before the end of the year as part of funding the federal budget.

The Resilient Federal Forest Act of 2015 was introduced by U.S. Rep. Bruce Westerman, R-Ark., a professional forester and engineer, in June. It was passed by 243 Republicans and 19 Democrats in July and awaits a hearing before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry.

In short, the bill, at the urging of the Obama administration, allows the U.S. Forest Service to access funds through the Federal Emergency Management Agency for fighting fires instead of depleting non-firefighting funds within the Forest Service budget. The bill also allows the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management expedited environmental review of forest management projects — including logging, thinning and prescribed burns — in public forests at imminent risk of major wildfire, insects and disease.

"I probably give the bill in its current form a low chance of passing out of the Senate, but that 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 in October makes possible a continuing resolution or omnibus appropriations package in December that could include the heart of the bill, he said.

Chances for CEs

The administration wants the firefighting 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 categorical exclusions on up to 2,500 acres in the 2014 farm bill and the Forest Service has used them, said Nick Smith, executive director of Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities in Portland.

Extending categorical exclusions 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.

Categorical exclusions 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 Forest Service 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 the Forest Service's current practice of treating only 200 acres in a project.

"Depending on funding, it can take a couple of years to complete projects and they can



Firefighter on Carpenter Road fire in northeastern Washington in August. USFS photo



First Creek Fire field work above Lake Chelan, Wash., in September. Wildfires burned millions of acres in the West this year. A bill in Congress seeks to reduce forest fuel loads on federal lands.

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 U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore.

Harvest levels dropped

The Forest Service 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 the Forest Service 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), 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 land-

scapes, 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.

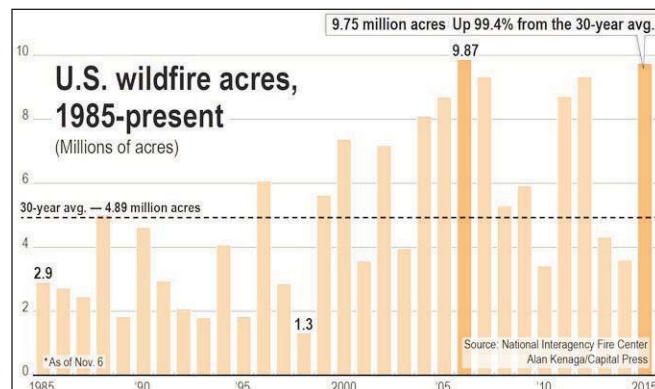
Encouraging Forest Service to act

"Sixty 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 Forest Service to use its new authority for larger categorical exclusions once it gets it. Unlike, prior legislation, the bill does not mandate logging, but allows the Forest Service 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, pointing out logging was required only with certain criteria met.

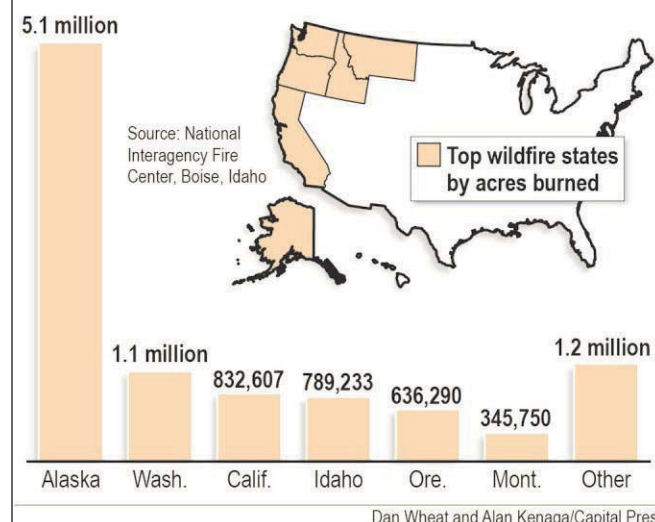
Joseph said a provision of the bill not likely to make it is one requiring any outside litigants to post a bond before they can sue to halt a project that's been developed with collaboration of all interested parties.

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



Wildfire acres by state, 2015

As of Oct. 30, Alaska accounted for nearly 53 percent of the 9.7 million acres burned by wildfires in the U.S. this year.



cord high, topping \$1.7 billion. Thirteen wildland firefighters died. The Forest Service 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, Washington, 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.

The bill 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, Haerberle's daughter, said in last

summer's 133,450-acre Okanogan fire.

Like other ranches impacted by western fires, the Haerberle-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 this year.

Frustration and skepticism

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

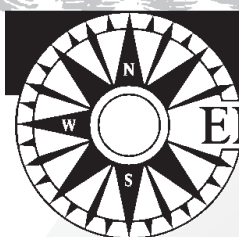
Even if it passes probably nothing will be done with it, he said.

A large amount of blow down timber was wasted for environmental reasons on the last Forest Service 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 Forest Service's 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."



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