

Bill would speed up forest recovery

Wednesday, November 02, 2005

A Northwest political odd couple, Washington Democrat Brian Baird and Oregon Republican Greg Walden, do agree on one thing: Forest restoration after natural disasters leaves much to be desired. So the two congressmen have teamed up to introduce the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act, a bill that would bring reason to what now, too often, is an unreasonable process.

As things now stand, planning in the wake of a disaster, whether it be fire or insect epidemic or hurricane, can take so long that dead and downed trees become virtually valueless long before anybody gets a chance to cut them. That means the government often must go in and spend tax dollars to do something that should have been done by private industry in the first place.

FERRA would change that by speeding up the process dramatically. After a disaster involving 1,000 acres or more, a 30-day recovery evaluation would begin. The Forest Service, or other agency in charge, would decide if any restoration activity were needed - and sometimes it's not appropriate. The agency could choose to use expedited procedures laid out in the bill or go with those established in existing law, again, on a strict deadline. Public involvement would remain part of the planning process, and those who opposed whatever plan was developed would retain the right of appeal. As is the case with the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, only those who'd participated in the process could appeal, effectively cutting out the New York City law student armed with a fax machine and a map.

From an environmental standpoint, it's worth noting some of the things FERRA would not do. It would not allow the harvest of green trees. It would not allow harvest in national parks or national monuments, or in wilderness areas. It would not create so-called plantation forests, instead requiring that any reforestation plan aim at creating as natural a landscape as possible, with multiple and native species. And, it would not waive a single environmental law now in place.

FERRA would do some positive things. Recovery plans would have to be based on a forest's existing plan, so that if clearcutting, for example, were barred in the forest's plan, it would not be allowed as part of disaster recovery. Any roads built during recovery would have to be obliterated as soon as they were no longer needed. The bill would require research in areas where there's little scientific evidence about what works best. And it would allow the government to assist adjacent tribes and private landowners, if asked.

The bill, introduced this week, already has drawn an impressively broad range of support from Walden's and Baird's fellows in the House of Representatives, a sign that in Washington, at least, some people understand the problems American forests face. It may not have smooth sailing, and if the reaction Baird has gotten from some of his traditional supporters is any indication, it will not. It's a valuable piece of legislation, however, and it should be approved.