



In Our View: Protecting Forests

Friday, November 4, 2005

Columbian editorial writers

There's much to like about the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act introduced this week by U.S. Reps. Brian Baird, D-Vancouver, and Greg Walden, R-Ore.

This plan to expedite clean-up and restoration of federal forests after catastrophic events has drawn bipartisan support. On this issue, refreshingly, there is no dichotomy, no good vs. evil showdown. The honorable debate is over which plan is best for federal forests after fires, hurricanes and windstorms. To their credit, both sides want to be good forest stewards; they're just at odds over how to reach that goal.

The bill's bipartisan support transcends Baird and Walden. Others who helped write it include U.S. Reps. Stephanie Herseth, D-S.D., and Wayne Gilchrest, R-Md.

One encouraging aspect of FERRA is the help it offers many different regions of the country. While our attention in the Northwest is focused on post-fire recovery, the focus is different elsewhere. For example, in the Gulf Coast region, 19 billion board feet of lumber were put on the ground by Hurricane Katrina.

Baird and Walden want to expedite salvage logging and restoration of forests after catastrophes. Some environmentalist groups, including the Gifford Pinchot Task Force, oppose the plan, advocating more deliberate recovery plans that allow nature, not government, to orchestrate forest recovery. But the Baird-Walden bill is packed with environmental protections, addressing forests as well as habitat. Those include:

- . The bill would allow removing only trees that are down, broken or severely root sprung, and which would be destroyed by decay in

five years.

- . It prohibits creation of permanent roads in forestlands. Also, it prohibits timber harvesting in national wilderness, national monument and national park areas.

- . FERRA summons forth the best available science. The bill requires thorough environmental review, evaluation and mitigation by experts.

- . FERRA mandates compliance with all environmental laws. Peer-reviewed scientific research would be increased.

Opponents of FERRA complain that federal funding of forest recovery efforts has been woefully inadequate; the bill's writers say it would be funded through existing sources. The nod here goes to the environmentalists' concerns. The sparsity of funding for Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument and other such areas has become so severe that managers have been forced to consider bringing in concessionaires to generate new revenue. So there's ample reason to worry about funding of FERRA.

Those who reject Baird's and Walden's proposal also complain that they were not fully consulted. "As part of a collaborative group that has been working on the ground for three years, I am very disappointed with Rep. Baird for not working with us on the bill," said John Squires of Packwood. He and others recently crafted the collaborative Smooth Juniper timber sale that drew editorial praise from The Columbian.

But the nod on this concern goes to the FERRA authors. This bill was written after two years of hearings and nationwide input. More than ample research was conducted. And, full public notice and participation in the future is mandated in the bill's language.

The strongest argument for FERRA is that it expedites an important process: forest restoration. As Baird said, the bill "will enable us to utilize dead timber instead of letting it go to waste and to responsibly restore the health and diversity of our forests after a catastrophic event." In other words, rehabilitation of public land would be increased, and that would help prevent many wildfires,

insect infestations and disease outbreaks.

The Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act, like most legislative initiatives, is not perfect. Baird and Walden concede that logging dead trees can increase erosion. But that's a short-term impact, and the long-term benefits are worth pursuing.

FERRA is based on science and common sense, and thus warrants support by the rest of Congress.

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