



The Oregonian

Now the fight is over dead trees

Two Northwest congressmen offer a salvage and reforestation plan to overhaul a policy that wastes time, money and wood

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This country's policy on dead trees is rotten. The government spends many months and millions of dollars writing salvage plans after wildfires and windstorms, and then environmental groups fight those plans until most of the trees decay and topple over.

There must be a better way. Congressmen Greg Walden, R-Ore., and Brian Baird, D-Wash., on Thursday introduced legislation that generally looks like a more sensible approach to salvage logging and reforestation. Their bill would accelerate planning after fires and other catastrophes strike forests, and allow for more timely salvage of dead trees and reforestation of damaged areas.

Environmental groups started attacking the Walden-Baird bill long before they read a word of the legislation. In Oregon, where the Biscuit fire and other blazes have left hundreds of thousands of acres burned, fire salvage has become one of the most bitter disputes on the national forests. Environmentalists insist that post-fire logging is harmful to damaged forests and a waste of taxpayer money, and say most reforestation is unwise and unnecessary.

Yet polls have shown that an overwhelming number of Oregonians still hold to the common-sense view that after fire sweeps across a forest, some blackened timber should be put to economic use, and in many cases seedlings should be planted to replace the dead trees.

The Walden-Baird bill seems a good-faith effort to put this practical view of timber salvage and reforestation into law and practice. It would require a federal assessment of a damaged forest in 30 days, and then allow another 90 days for development of a salvage and recovery plan. It includes a streamlined public appeals process patterned after the healthy forest law approved by Congress two years ago.

The bill is not perfect. It is unreasonable to suggest that a Forest Service team could sweep in after a half-million-acre fire like the Biscuit and in just 30 days produce a responsible recovery plan. It is a mistake to make no distinctions in the bill for salvage in roadless or old-growth areas.

Yet Walden and Baird are on the right track. Their bill is an attempt to stop the waste of time, money, wood and jobs inherent in the current salvage policy. It is not a radical, log-all approach to post-fire recovery. It is nothing like the awful salvage rider rammed through Congress that opened up Northwest forests, including green, live trees, to logging.

Yet critics are already asserting that Walden and Baird are ignoring the best science and sacrificing the health of local forests. Yet it seems to us that it is Northwest environmental groups that oppose virtually all post-fire salvage that are looking at this issue through a narrow and warped lens.

While they fight over every last blackened tree, there is no letup in the global demand for wood products. The Northwest is one of the world's great timber-growing regions. To fight even a modest salvage program is to imply that dead trees, killed in an Oregon wildfire, are more precious than live trees somewhere else, even in a vulnerable rainforest. Like a lot of things about our country's salvage policy, that just doesn't make sense.

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