

CONGRESS NEEDS TO ACT NOW ON CATASTROPHIC EVENT LEGISLATION

Support The Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act

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Catastrophic events remind us that nature's awesome powers can cause catastrophic damage to people, to infrastructure and to the natural resources that are so vital to humanity's well being.

Consider just a few of the worst historical natural disasters that come to mind, such as the Peshtigo fire which burned 3.8 million acres, destroyed nine towns and killed 1,500 people; the Johnstown Flood killing about 2,200; the Galveston Hurricane and flood where more than 8,000 people died; the San Francisco Earthquake and subsequent fires that destroyed 4 square miles of the city and caused between 500 and 3000 deaths; and most recently, the major fire conflagrations of 2000 to 2004 that burned more than 30 million acres of private and public land, destroyed an immense amount of both private and public property and cost about \$6 billion to suppress. Last year's hurricanes along the gulf coast and this week's brush fires in Florida are just the latest reminders of nature's power.

Disasters such as these often happen without warning. They instruct us of the critical need for preparation. While much attention is appropriately devoted to search and rescue and to immediate recovery of essential facilities, little attention is frequently given to the effective rehabilitation and recovery of forests, rangelands, streams, and watersheds devastated by such events

For a number of reasons, including lack of preplanning, inadequate funding, and slow and cumbersome processes, many of these areas damaged by catastrophic events were not promptly or adequately rehabilitated. As a result, natural resources and their bounty are significantly degraded. Communities continue to deal with the social, economic and environmental consequences of these catastrophic events such as pollution, erosion, blighted neighborhoods and significant reduction in diversity of plants and wildlife that enrich our life.

This is unfortunate because we know that immediate action is essential to successful stabilization and recovery of civic functions, infrastructure and natural resources. In our country, on both public and private land, natural resources such as trees and other material might be used if prompt action is undertaken. Delay may not only increase the cost of and decrease the likelihood of success in recovery efforts, but it may also result in alien invasive species supplanting native vegetation that provides the diversity necessary for an abundance of wildlife.

Time is a major enemy of successful stabilization and recovery efforts because many actions may need to be undertaken before future events – such as repeat wildfire or flooding – make such action infeasible, uneconomical or both. Time required to complete normal “business as usual” inventory, planning and analysis procedures is simply too time consuming to permit prompt action. Fortunately, Congressmen Greg Walden, R-Ore., and Brian Baird, D-Wash., with

nearly 150 bipartisan co-sponsors, are bringing legislation to the forefront of House activity that would allow for prompt rehabilitation of federal lands significantly damaged by a catastrophic event, if such rehabilitation is in the best interest of the forest. Additionally, their legislation, the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act, would require enhanced research to improve the overall pool of scientific knowledge available to land managers and policy makers.

The Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act wisely recognizes the necessity for a streamlined planning and decision process. The process, although streamlined, does require specific compliance with environmental laws including consultation with CEQ on NEPA procedures as well as consultation regarding endangered species and other compliance requirements. Currently, substantial rehabilitation efforts have been delayed simply because of cumbersome processes. And these delays are not necessarily better but such delay often insures that rehabilitations and recovery efforts are more difficult, more costly, and sometimes flat out infeasible.

A look back at just a few of the worst major natural disasters in history should convince even the skeptic that there is an obvious need to take immediate, effective action to implement carefully designed recovery efforts on damaged forestland. Such immediate action can prevent further damage, allow for faster forest rehabilitation and utilize the value of dead timber (rather than more live, green trees from somewhere else) before it rots and loses all usefulness.

The Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act allows trained forest managers to act in accordance with carefully developed forest plans and in compliance with environmental laws to best restore, protect and enhance the health of our federal forests.

This legislation deserves favorable action by the House and the Senate and approval by the President. To do otherwise would be a disservice to both present and future generations of Americans who depend on these natural resources.