

Journal editorial, 11-16-05: Speed forest restoration

*By The Journal Editorial Board*

What do you do with dead trees? If a natural event such as a wildfire, ice storm or blow down kills thousands of trees, what do you do with them?

A bill co-sponsored by South Dakota Rep. Stephanie Herseth would allow federal land managers to use expedited procedures for implementing a forest restoration plan. Because the normal environmental review and comment period can take too long to implement a salvage logging project before the wood is of no use, the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act (HR 4200) would require land managers to decide on a course of action within 30 days of a natural event that damages areas larger than 1,000 acres. A 90-day environmental review and public comment period would follow, using procedures outlined in the Healthy Forests law enacted by Congress in 2003.

A field hearing on forest issues was held in Hill City on Aug. 31, which included House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health chairman Greg Walden, R-Ore., Herseth and U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Region chief Rick Cables. The group toured areas of the Black Hills National Forest scarred by mountain pine beetle infestations.

Aaron Everett of the Black Hills Forest Resource Association credited the Hill City hearing and Rep. Herseth for alterations of the bill that will help the Black Hills. HR 4200 would allow federal officials to establish pre-approved restoration guidelines for a given area and type of vegetation. For instance, in the Black Hills where ponderosa pine tends to deteriorate quickly, forest officials could create restoration plans that could allow for salvage timber projects to be implemented shortly after a wildfire, or to prevent wildfires by clearing away dead or dying trees. Time-consuming environmental reviews and public comments would have been done while the restoration plans are formulated in anticipation of a future natural disaster.

The pre-approved restoration plans must be consistent with existing land management plans. Logging would be limited to the removal of dead, broken or downed trees and need not cover the entire area of damage. Projects would not be allowed in wilderness areas and national parks, and no new permanent roads could be built.

Environmental groups have complained that the bill would allow the Forest Service to ignore existing environmental laws, but Russ Levsen, communications director for Rep. Herseth, said the bill requires the plans to be in compliance with all environmental laws.

At a subcommittee hearing on HR 4200 last week, Herseth said the bill would give the Forest Service additional tools to fight pine beetle infestations, including in the Black Hills. "Today, a categorical exclusion could, at best, be used to treat 250 acres of the affected forest. Under the proposed legislation, the Forest Service would have a number of new tools, and they could move more quickly and treat a larger section of the forest. The rapid spread of the mountain pine beetle, the associated fire risk and our inability to stop them in the current regulatory framework convince me that something needs to change."

We urge the House and Senate to pass the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act. It's better to prevent a fire than to have to put one out. After a natural disaster, though, it's better to use a dead tree than to lose it.