DuluthNewsTribune.com

Posted on Fri, Nov. 18, 2005

Congress poised to support America's forests

Commentary by BOB HEDBURG

A bill in Congress by U.S. Representatives Greg Walden (R-Ore.), Brian Baird (D-Wash.) and Stephanie Herseth, (D-S.D.) includes thoughtful and innovative ideas that will protect and rehabilitate the valuable national forests. Dubbed the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act, the bill has bipartisan support and should gain the support of those who are passionate about ensuring that our national forests are reforested after catastrophic events.

After any catastrophic event, our priorities should include rapid assessment, quick action, strengthened research and sufficient funding to achieve results on the ground.

Unfortunately, we can't often act on those priorities. It is not due to a lack of will or expertise. The men and women who work for the Forest Service are qualified and capable of getting this work done. The problem is a series of laws and regulations that put paperwork ahead of the forests on which people and wildlife depend.

Reforestation and recovery efforts on the federal forest lands across the country have been delayed, stopped, or never begun because well-intentioned processes have gotten out of control and prevent action. The Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act would give us the opportunity to do better.

The bill creates a number of opportunities -- it enables forest managers to more quickly recover lands after catastrophes, expands research projects and provides greater flexibility in how important recovery and reforestation can be funded. It does this while maintaining current environmental laws.

Every year, on average more than 5 million acres of forests burn in wildfires. In 2003, insects or disease severely impacted 12 million acres of forests, up from more than 6 million in 2002. Additionally, hurricanes have left a devastating footprint on forests in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas and Florida this year. Natural events will forever alter our forests, but we can bring them back with timely and thoughtful science-based action.

Federal managers, mainly the USDA Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, are bound by bureaucratic process, judicial delays and lack of financial resources. The result is that recovery and reforestation can take years and in some cases decades.

A major windstorm, with wind speeds up to 100 m.p.h., swept across northern Minnesota on July 4, 1999. More than 477,000 acres were damaged within the Superior National Forest boundary; 370,000 of those acres were inside the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. The environmental analysis undertaken by the Forest Service was extraordinary in scope, scale and timeframe. The Council on Environmental Quality granted alternative arrangements to the Agency to speed recovery; only the fourth time the agency received this authority. This allowed for removal of fire-prone debris to begin by October in the most critical areas of the Gunflint Corridor. By May 2001, over 89,000 acres had been through NEPA. The goal of the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act is to make forest restoration efforts on all forests as timely as the response to this windstorm.

If we truly wish to recover and rehabilitate our forests so they can provide benefits over the long-term for everyone, then ask Congress to enact the act. We believe this bill provides some creative ways to address the much needed conservation of our nation's forest -- enabling forest managers the flexibility and tools to act quickly. Let's not get stuck in political rhetoric at the cost of recovering our nation's forests.

BOB HEDBURG of Duluth is chairman-elect of the Society of American Foresters' Minnesota chapter.