

EDITORIALS

Wyden should support Walden's forest plan

Now is the perfect time for Oregon's two senators to throw their weight behind a bill that would address the region's forest health crisis. That bill, which came up before a Senate committee last week, is the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, co-sponsored by Oregon Rep. Greg Walden and supported by President Bush. It passed easily in the House in May, but its fate in the Senate is less certain.

That isn't for lack of support from Sen. Gordon Smith, like Walden a Republican. But Smith's colleague, Democratic Ron Wyden, isn't exactly rushing to Walden's side — or to the side of Oregonians who are beginning to wheeze away yet another smoky summer. Wyden, in fact, has introduced competing legislation. His staff have characterized the bill as a compromise, but it looks to us more like a backburn intended to stall the advance of Walden's plan.

Launching a pre-emptive compromise, as Wyden has done, suggests that a piece of legislation is extreme. Walden's is nothing of the sort. It simply acknowledges the fact that millions and millions of acres of federal forest land are in poor health, and therefore at high risk of catastrophic wildfires, disease and insect outbreaks.

It makes a reasonable attempt to do lower some of the the hurdles that prevent federal forest managers from doing something about it.

Thus, the bill gives the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management the ability to limit the number of alternative treatment scenarios required during the planning of projects. They now generate three to five different treatment alternatives, but that number would fall to one. The result would be speed, which is important to anyone who lives near a fuel-choked forest that's one cigarette butt away from becoming an inferno.

Speed, too, is the reason Walden's bill speeds up the clock on administrative appeals and lawsuits, which envi-

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ronmentalists now use to delay projects for months, and even years. The bill does this without cutting the public out of the planning process. Far from it, in fact. An additional public meeting is required for all projects implemented under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

If this were such an extreme proposal, and one in need of significant compromise, we wonder whether it would have passed in the House at all. And we doubt it would have passed, as it did, by a vote of 256 to 170, with support from 42 Democrats. This bipartisanship suggests that Walden's bill is, in fact, something of a compromise already.

Now, we don't mean to suggest that Wyden's bill is bad. It isn't. It would help clear unhealthy forestland in the urban-wildland interface (as would Walden's bill), and it would speed up the analysis of smaller projects elsewhere. If Wyden's bill became law, forest conditions would improve. But they won't improve nearly as much, or as quickly, as they would under Walden's legislation, which, we repeat, has passed in the House and enjoys the president's support.

Were Wyden concerned above all with the welfare of those Oregonians who live within coughing distance of a terminally ill forest, he'd get behind Wyden's bill, as Smith has done, and push for all he's worth. That he hasn't is cause for concern.

Perhaps what Wyden needs is a little camping trip to acquaint himself with the problem. We recommend Davis Lake. The fishing's good, and we hear the weenie-ring is second to none.