

# Act brings balance back to our forests

Last year in Oregon, more than 1 million acres of forest and rangeland burned. That's an area twice the size of Rhode Island.

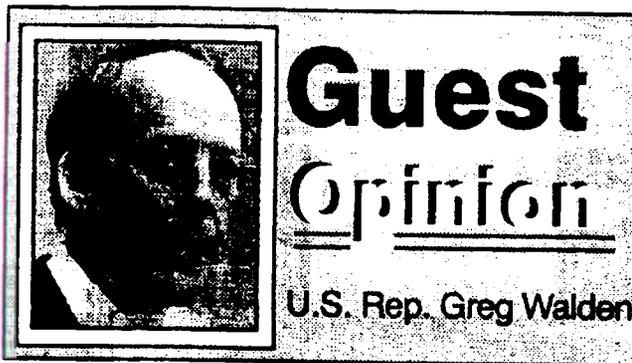
It was the worst wildfire season in the last 50 years in Oregon, Arizona and Colorado. Whole communities were threatened. We watched in horror as watersheds and critical habitat burned, air sheds were choked with smoke and green forests turned black.

A century of suppressing fire coupled with near abandonment of work in our forests has resulted in catastrophic fires of record-setting proportions all across Oregon and the West. Tree stands in some forests are 10 times what they should be. Fuel loads have grown up, providing a ladder for fire to reach the canopy and burn with reckless abandon.

And more than half the time when land managers try to get into our forests to help clean out the brush and thin the stands, their efforts are appealed by outside groups who seem to want to stop any activity on public land.

While opponents of forest restoration work appeal and litigate, projects languish and forests that are scheduled for help instead burn. The gridlock is as unacceptable as the extraordinarily destructive fires that result from it.

It's time to fix the problems that prevent trained foresters from doing the work that must be done to save and restore the health of our forests and watersheds and make our com-



munities safer. With more than 190 million acres of forestlands at high risk of catastrophic fire and disease and bug infestation, it's long past time to get to work.

Tuesday, the U.S. House passed and sent to the Senate the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (House Bill 1904), which I've worked on for nearly a year. It would streamline the appeals process while involving the public more in the initial planning process. Getting local communities more involved in efforts to improve forest health around them is a concept the Western governors have called for and we have embraced in this legislation. This streamlined process allows for quicker action in our forests and will result in more jobs in our rural communities.

The legislation calls for peer-reviewed studies of how best to manage forests that are bug infested and diseased. We call on the greatest minds in our universities to take plots up to

1,000 acres and determine what approach works best. Our opponents, ignoring other federal laws and rules, called these studies "1,000-acre clear-cuts" in an effort to mislead the public and kill this measure. They're wrong.

We limited the provisions of the legislation to areas most in need: around communities and watersheds, on high-risk lands that encompass habitat for threatened and endangered species where wildlife officials have identified catastrophic fire as a threat to the viability of the species, and on high-risk landscapes particularly susceptible to disease and bug infestations. The bill does not apply to commercial logging, roadless areas, wilderness areas, parks, refuges or monuments.

If we can demonstrate that a simpler and more efficient process can work in targeted areas, we can rebuild the trust and collaborative approach that is so greatly needed in the debate over how best to manage our public lands. The president has endorsed this bill, as have 137 of my colleagues in Congress, including 17 Democrats. The vote on Tuesday gives us the greatest hope in years to improve forest health and create real jobs for rural communities. Isn't that the balance we've all wanted for a long time?

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*Rep. Greg Walden represents Oregon's 2nd Congressional District, which takes in Jackson County, Eastern Oregon and part of Josephine County, including Grants Pass.*