

Walden scores a big victory on forest bill

Shortly after Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., unveiled his forest health bill in the House of Representatives, it was ridiculed by a Democrat among the Oregon delegation.

"It won't pass the laugh test," scoffed Rep. Peter DeFazio, who said the bill would pave the way for 1,000-acre clear cuts in Oregon's forests.

We wonder who is laughing now that the bill, known as the Health Forests Restoration Act, passed unanimously in the House Agriculture Committee. It is now headed Tuesday to the full House where it will likely do more than pass the laugh test.

Apparently Walden was able to demonstrate that the bill does not allow clear cuts. What it does is exempt 1,000-acre plots from the usual protracted planning process to accommodate timely research into insect epidemics. It was unfair and disingenuous of DeFazio to suggest otherwise. If passed, Walden's bill will expedite the ability of forest managers to treat 20 million acres of forest at risk to wildfires, insects and disease.



IN MY OPINION

Rick Swart

It will also prevent endless appeals by environmental groups. That is good news for rural communities facing the threat of catastrophic forest fires. Last summer more than 7 million acres of forest burned, leaving behind damaged rivers, streams and lakes and releasing tons of dangerous pollutants into the air.

The unanimous endorsement of the bill in the House Agriculture Committee is a major victory for Walden, who has struggled to convince his colleagues that thinning is needed to improve forest health. His campaign got a boost last summer when President Bush came to Oregon to see the devastation of the 500,000-acre Biscuit Fire and, later when Bush, in his state of the union address, mentioned forest health as a top priority.

If Walden is successful in steering his healthy forests initiative through Congress, he will have achieved a political miracle, a major paradigm shift from hands-off preservation to hands-on management and, yes, even some responsible logging. For many people close to the forest health problem in the West, 20 million acres of fuels reduction is not nearly enough. The Department of Interior estimates that about 190 million acres of federal land are at risk of catastrophic wildfire. For now, however, Walden's bill represents a good compromise between the political realities of Washington and the environmental needs of the people back home in Oregon.

Rick Swart is editor and publisher of the Wallowa County Chieftain in Enterprise. E-mail: editor@wallowa.com.

Rep. Greg Walden: House has rare chance to end forest gridlock

05/19/03

REP. GREG WALDEN

Last year in Oregon more than one 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 the country. 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.

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.

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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 communities safer.

This week the U.S. House has a rare opportunity to pass legislation, House Resolution 1904, which I've worked on for nearly a year, that would streamline the forest-management appeals process while involving the public more in the initial planning process. That 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 "1,000-acre clear-cuts" in an effort to mislead the public and kill this measure. They're wrong.

The measure only applies to areas most in need: around communities and watersheds, on high-risk lands encompassing 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 national 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.

HR 1904 is cosponsored by 137 of my colleagues, including 17 Democrats. Tuesday's vote gives us the greatest hope in years to improve forest health and create real jobs for rural communities. Isn't that the balance we want?

Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., represents the state's Second Congressional District.