

## REVIEW & OUTLOOK

### All Fired Up

Memorial Day marks the start of fire season, which has come to mean infernos that destroy millions of acres of trees, homes and American wildlife habitat. But thanks to some unusual leadership in Congress, there's a chance the fires might not be so hot this year.

The House this week passed (256-170)

the Healthy Forests Restoration Act that will finally allow the cleanup of dying forests, which are the main cause of runaway fires. Just as important, it marks one of the first times that a bipartisan majority has told the extremist environmental groups that have held a monopoly over forest policy for decades to, well, go climb a tree.

It's about time. Wildfires ripped apart more than seven million acres of forestland last year, double the 10-year average. The fires stem from years of mismanagement, as Big Green lobbies and the Clinton-Gore Administration worked to end human stewardship of natural resources and instead let them exist "naturally." Tens of millions of acres are today dying from insects or disease—and are therefore at a high risk for catastrophic wildfires.

Healthy Forests, crafted by the Bush Administration and Republicans from the West, will fix some of this. It authorizes the Forest Service to start immediately thinning up to 20 million acres in the most at-risk areas, primarily near towns and cities. It opens up to 250,000 acres to experimental treatments by universities and forest schools. Best of all it streamlines regulatory review, making it harder for greens to strangle cleanup in endless legal appeals.

We wish the bill went further. It's great that some forests will finally get the stewardship they deserve, but the bill exempted millions of other acres in order to win over Northeast suburban Republicans and Southern Democrats. We're also still waiting for Congress to have an honest discussion about the benefits of commercial logging in public forests; this can provide revenue for forest management and affordable products (homes, energy) for Americans.

Yet it says a lot about how the debate has

changed that this bill passed at all. "Bipartisan environmental legislation" usually refers to Democrats and Northeast Republicans passing onerous new regulations. But the greens overplayed their hand on this issue and got burned themselves. As suburban Denver residents choked on smoke and as firefighters died, the green lobbies argued

*House Democrats buck Greens to fight wildfires.*

that it should all burn, baby, burn rather than allow human beings to manage public lands.

This year the greens threw everything they had to kill Healthy Forests, but 42 Democrats voted with Republicans for reform. It's no coincidence that many of those Democrats hail from the West and South, where forests are most at risk for catastrophic fire, and where forest management has become a campaign issue.

All of this has had the benefit of exposing just how unreasonable the Sierra Club and other green lobbies have become. They refuse to tolerate any change at all in such controversial, and sometimes damaging, laws as the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act. They did themselves further harm this year by arguing against giving Pentagon bases even some small flexibility over environmental laws, which have damaged military training.

Which brings us to the Senate, where Democratic leader Tom Daschle managed to kill a similar forest bill last year (even as he snuck through a quick healthy-forests fix for his home state of South Dakota). Senate Democrats, who jump to Sierra Club commands, are already condemning the House bill. But Mr. Daschle is himself up for election next year, as are several Western Democrats; stalling a House bill that passed with Democratic support will only make these Senators look as out of touch with the real environment as the Beltway environmental lobbyists.

With the hot weather approaching, it's only a matter of time before the first big blazes appear. Voters may not understand why the Senate is sitting on a bill that will save lives, property and wildlife habitat. Talk about being in the hot seat.