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Community

Logging and fire debate grows

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Testimony at congressional hearing held in Oregon highlights diverse viewpoints

MEDFORD — Oregon State University researcher Dan Donato faced the heat of a congressional hearing Friday, defending his research as well as his ethics in connection with a controversial study on post-wildfire logging.

At the nearly four-hour hearing in Medford City Hall, U.S. House members met with forest experts, including scientists from OSU, to discuss proposed forest legislation, conflicting research on logging, and the relationship between science and policy.

Eleven people testified before members of the U.S. House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health.

It was standing-room only, with those in attendance widely divided on salvage logging and the recent study by Donato and a team of researchers that brought academic freedom, research integrity and the peer review process into the media spotlight.

Some in attendance wore green ribbons, indicating solidarity with the timber industry and post-fire logging advocates.

Others sported pins reading "Support Science Not Special Interest," or held signs proclaiming "Science Not \$cience."

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden chairs the subcommittee. The Oregon Republican scheduled Friday's field hearing at the request of New Mexico Rep. Tom Udall, the ranking Democrat on the subcommittee.

Last fall, Walden, along with Reps. Brian Baird, D-Wash., and Stephanie Herseth, D-S.D., introduced the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act, legislation that proposes pre-approved forest management plans to speed responses — sometimes logging — to wildfires and other natural disasters.

"We've observed that more research is needed on post-fire management," Walden said, asking the experts for their opinions on the effects of salvage logging on burned areas, and the best timeline for post-catastrophe logging.

Several witnesses, including Stephen Hobbs, chairman of the Oregon Board of Forestry and executive associate dean of OSU's College of Forestry, and Hal Salwasser, dean of OSU's College of Forestry, testified that forest management legislation also must provide consistent funding for long-term research and forest maintenance.

They also called for more partnerships between government agencies and universities to assemble teams dedicated to forest research, outreach and education.

The experts didn't all agree on the best forest practices after wildfires. Some advocated leaving the land alone to regenerate on its own, while others supported salvage logging. Selective salvage logging, and logging combined with replanting also drew proponents.

Rep. Jay Inslee, D-Wash., criticized the bill introduced by Walden, Baird and Herseth, saying it will take science out of forestry decisions by rushing responses to fires and other disasters. He also questioned the level of funding.

Inslee has introduced his own forest emergency response bill that differs substantially from Walden's.

Walden countered that his bill puts science back into the fire response process, and makes a commitment to funding.

Donato and his co-authors conducted research on the southwest Oregon area burned in the 2002 Biscuit fire. They found in this case that logging hindered forest regrowth, and created tinder that increased the short-term risk of subsequent fires.

The study appeared in the Jan. 20 issue of the journal *Science*, after some professors in the College of Forestry tried to delay publication.

At Friday's hearing, Donato spent as much time defending himself as he did explaining his research findings.

While Inslee praised Donato's "courage and humility" in the face of censorship, Baird questioned the researcher's scientific integrity, calling him "disingenuous."

Baird took issue with the title of Donato's study, "Post-Wildfire Logging Hinders Regeneration and Increases Fire Risk."

Baird said the title encourages wide-sweeping generalizations, not making it clear that the findings apply only to the Biscuit fire area.

Also, the forest burned in that fire wasn't logged until 2004, two years after the blaze. Such a delay isn't standard, and could be why the forest regeneration suffered, Baird said.

He also questioned Donato's data, and asked why requests to see the raw data weren't honored.

Donato responded that the title of a journal article is limited to eight words, and that his study wasn't meant to be applied to fires in other landscapes and times.

Donato also took heat from Walden regarding compliance issues with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

Donato's study is funded by a three-year, \$307,000 grant from the BLM. The final year's worth of funding was suspended earlier this month, due to compliance concerns. OSU addressed those concerns, and the BLM

quickly reinstated the funding.

Walden asked why Donato failed to consult a bureau representative prior to publication of his article in Science, and why an earlier draft and online version of the article made reference to legislation, which provisions of the grant prohibit.

Donato said all compliance concerns stemmed from miscommunication and misunderstandings between OSU and the BLM.

Despite their differences, Donato, the other witnesses and the legislators agreed that while science is an important resource for policy makers, forests play roles in society that go beyond the environment.

Forests provide ecological, economic and aesthetic resources, noted Rep. Peter DeFazio. How each forest is managed after fires depends on its specific purpose, the Oregon Democrat said.

Cynthia West, acting director of Pacific Northwest Research Station, said, "While science can provide a solid basis for land management and policy decisions, science alone isn't enough."

Other witnesses at the hearing included Thomas Atzet of Atzet Ecological Consulting; Dave Peterson, fire ecologist with the Forest Service; Rich Dreihobl, retired BLM field manager; Peter Kolb, Montana State University forestry specialist; Jerry Franklin, professor in the College of Forest Resources at the University of Washington; Dave Perry, OSU professor emeritus; and Ted Lorensen, assistant state forester with the Oregon Department of Forestry.

On the Net: Testimony from Friday's U.S. House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health field hearing is available online at <http://resourcescommittee.house.gov/archives/109/ffh/index.htm>.

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