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In Fire's Wake, Logging Study Inflames Debate

University Study Challenges Cutting Of Burnt Timber

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MEDFORD, Ore. -- If fire ravages a national forest, as happened here in southwest Oregon when the Biscuit fire torched a half-million acres four years ago, the Bush administration believes loggers should move in quickly, cut marketable trees that remain and replant a healthy forest.

"We must quickly restore the areas that have been damaged by fire," President Bush said in Oregon four years ago after touring damage from the Biscuit fire. He called it "common sense."

Common sense, though, may not always be sound science. An Oregon State University study has raised an extraordinary ruckus in the Pacific Northwest this winter by saying that logging burned forests does not make much sense.

Logging after the Biscuit fire, the study found, has harmed forest recovery and increased fire risk. What the short study did not say -- but what many critics of the Bush administration are reading into it -- is that the White House has ignored science to please the timber industry. The study is consistent with research findings from around the world that have documented how salvage logging can strip burned forests of the biological diversity that fire and natural recovery help protect.

The study also questions the scientific rationale behind a bill pending in Congress that would ease procedures for post-fire logging in federal forests. This, in turn, has annoyed the bill's lead sponsor, Rep. Greg Walden (R-Ore.), who has received far more campaign money from the forest products industry than from any other source, according to data compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics.

Logging after fires is becoming more and more important to the bottom line of timber companies. It generates about 40 percent of timber volume on the nation's public lands, according to Forest Service data compiled by the World Wildlife Fund, and accounts for nearly half the logging on public land in Oregon.

But there is much more to the dispute than money. The Oregon State study was published in *Science*, the prestigious peer-reviewed journal. It appeared after a group of professors from the university's College of Forestry, which gets 10 percent of its funding from the timber industry, tried to halt its publication.

Professors behind the failed attempt to keep the article out of *Science* had earlier written their own non-peer-reviewed study of the Biscuit fire -- a study embraced by the Bush administration and the timber industry. It said post-fire logging and replanting were exactly what was needed to speed growth of big trees and suppress fire.

A couple of weeks after the *Science* article appeared and infuriated the forest industry, the federal Bureau of Land Management, which footed the bill for the study of the Biscuit fire, cut off the final year of the three-year, \$300,000 grant. BLM officials said the authors violated their funding contract by attempting to

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influence legislation pending in Congress.

After the cutoff, Democrats in the Northwest congressional delegation complained about government censorship, academic freedom and the politicization of science in the Bush administration. Within a week, the BLM backed down and restored the grant.

Oregon State University has officially scolded the forestry professors for inappropriate behavior and praised the authors of the Science article.

Still, the issue is far from over.

On Friday here in Medford, there was a field hearing of the House subcommittee on forests and forest health, which is chaired by Walden, chief sponsor of the forest recovery bill that was cast in a dim light by the Science article.

In this corner of Oregon, where environmentalists and logging interests have been jousting for decades, jawboning about forest policy is a spectator sport. The hearing, held in Medford City Hall, was so packed with spectators that the fire marshal insisted it could begin only after he delivered a stern lecture on emergency exits.

The hearing's star witness -- and principal punching bag -- was Daniel Donato, lead author of the Science article and a graduate student at Oregon State's forestry school. By at least a decade, he was the youngest participant in the hearing. Rail thin and wearing neatly pressed khakis, he looked even younger.

Walden accused Donato, 29, of having failed to tell his federal research supervisor about the findings of his study, as is required by the terms of his research contract with the federal government. Donato conceded that he had not known about the requirement for consultation and that he knows more about it now.

Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.), another member of the subcommittee and a co-sponsor of the forest recovery bill, was even more disgruntled. He charged Donato with a long list of professional failings and character flaws, including "deliberate bias," lack of humility and ignorance of statistical theory.

Donato smiled nervously through these attacks and politely -- but firmly -- told the hearing that his article was solid on its facts and fair in its conclusions. He also said the forest study should not be viewed as, nor was it intended to be, the final word on post-fire logging.

After Donato was excused, one of the nation's best-known forest ecologists attempted to summarize the world's collective scientific knowledge on logging after fires. Jerry Franklin, a professor of ecosystem science at the University of Washington's College of Forest Resources, warned the hearing that Congress should be careful not to prescribe salvage logging as a cure-all for every forest fire.

Salvage logging and replanting can often succeed, Franklin said, if the intent is to turn a scorched landscape into a stand of trees for commercial harvest.

If, however, Congress wants to promote the ecologically sound recovery of burned federal forests, Franklin said, the overwhelming weight of scientific research suggests that "salvage logging is not going to be appropriate."

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