

Open Letter to U.S. Senate and President Obama from Scientists Concerned about Post-fire Logging and Logging of Old Forest on Federal Public Lands

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As professional scientists with backgrounds in ecological sciences and natural resources management, we are greatly concerned that legislation, S. 3085 (Roberts, R-KS), which passed the Senate Agriculture Committee on September 13, 2016, would use fear and misunderstanding about wildland fires to suspend federal environmental protections to expedite logging and clearcutting of both post-fire wildlife habitat and unburned old forests on National Forest lands. This legislation would also weaken most analysis of adverse environmental impacts, restrict public participation, and largely prevent enforcement of environmental laws on federal forestlands by the courts. A companion logging bill, HR 2647, passed the House in July 2015. Portions of these bills are also being considered for inclusion in an energy bill, as the conference committee attempts to reconcile House and Senate versions.

A similar logging measure now being actively circulated in the U.S. Senate by Senators Crapo (R-ID), Murkowski (R-AK), and Wyden (D-OR), the “Wildfire Budgeting, Response, and Forest Management Act of 2016,” would override and severely weaken federal environmental laws pertaining to analysis and disclosure of adverse environmental impacts, and public participation in forest management decisions. The legislation would increase logging of biologically rich post-fire habitat, mature forests and old-growth trees and remove most of the structure a forest ecosystem needs to properly function.

The proposed House and Senate legislation addresses the borrowing of funds from other programs to cover costs of fire suppression. However, both bills would increase funding for suppression of mostly backcountry fires in remote areas, and neither would focus on, or prioritize, protection of rural communities. The best available science has shown that effective home protection from wildland fire depends on “defensible space” work within approximately 100 feet of individual structures, and improving the fire resistance of the homes themselves.¹ Unfortunately, neither bill recognizes the ecological costs of further suppressing fire in fire-adapted ecosystems. While the bills seek legitimate budgetary reforms on “fire-borrowing,” they do so by promoting the idea that wildfires themselves are “disasters” and by promoting policies that will damage forest ecosystems by encouraging more fire suppression and logging in fire-dependent systems instead of addressing fiscally responsible cost containment through prioritization of suppression efforts, homeowner and firefighter safety, and appropriate use of wildland fire for ecosystem benefits.

National Forests were established for the public good and include most of the nation’s remaining examples of intact forests. They are a wellspring of clean water for millions of Americans, a legacy for wildlife, sequester vast quantities of carbon important in climate change mitigation, and provide recreation and economic opportunities to rural communities. Though it may seem to some laypersons that a post-fire landscape is a catastrophe, numerous scientific studies tell us that even in the patches where forest fires burn most intensely, the resulting wildlife habitats are among the most ecologically rich and diverse on western forestlands and are essential to support the full range of forest biodiversity.²

We urge you to vote against these legislative proposals, and urge President Obama to veto these bills if they are passed in some form by Congress.

¹See <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/book/9780128027493> (Chapter 13).

²See <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/book/9780128027493> (Chapters 1 through 5, and 11).

Sincerely,

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