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Legislation Would Ban Logging On Federal Lands

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Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

This past October saw the introduction of the most significant federal land-use legislation since the Wilderness Act of 1964. Known as the “National Forest Protection and Restoration Act of 1997” (H.R. 2789), this bill would fundamentally redefine the purpose of our federal public lands, placing their management on a sound scientific basis, and freeing them from the tyranny of exploitation by government agencies acting as the handmaidens of timber corporations. In short, this legislation would ban all commercial logging on federal public lands. [Note: as of January 2004 this legislation is known simply as the “National Forest Protection and Restoration Act.”]

Let’s examine a few arguments for the enactment of this legislation.

- **Almost all timber sales in the national forests actually lose money for taxpayers.** In testifying before Congress in 1992, a professional forester on the staff of the Congressional Research Service reported that for twelve straight years, from 1980 to 1991, the Forest Service timber program lost \$7.3 billion. More recently, in 1996 Congress appropriated approximately \$1 billion for the national forest timber program, including timber sale planning and administration, replanting, logging road construction, and timber productivity research. Yet, gross timber sales receipts amounted to only \$597.1 million—and the Forest Service has already put \$367.8 million of this back into its timber program, rather than returning the money to taxpayers. Also, by selling the public’s timber at a loss, the Forest Service distorts the market and keeps privately held timber from being harvested and sold.
- **The U.S. economy would be improved.** Approximately 30,000 loggers and mill workers are employed as a result of the public lands timber program. Since this program operates at an average annual net loss of over \$750 million, this means that taxpayers are losing about \$25,000 annually for each timber worker employed logging public forests. The average timber worker wage is about \$22,000 per year. If we end all commercial logging of public forests and redirect these current logging subsidies into ecological restoration jobs on national forests, we could employ all of the current public lands timber workers at a salary increase, and still have over \$200 million remaining to reduce the deficit of the U.S. Treasury.

- **Timber cutting damages fisheries.** In the Pacific Northwest 103 salmon species are already extinct and 214 native salmon stocks at risk of extinction. Research has consistently shown that clearcuts and logging roads have catastrophic consequences for our native fish populations.
- **Studies link logging to flood damage.** In recent years there has been record flooding in Oregon and Washington, exacerbated by clearcutting the upper reaches of the watersheds in national forests in the Cascades. Every river in western Washington—except the Nisqually—flooded in the 1990–91 season. *Cascadia Times*, referring to a 1980s study in the North Cascades by University of Washington hydrologist Dennis Harr, stated, “In conditions similar to the 1996 flood, characterized by heavy rains and warm winds on snowpack, clearcuts produced ten times the runoff of mature forests. And younger forests pumped out 40% more water than older forests.”
- **Logging is linked to increased severity of forest fires.** A scientific study of the Sierra Nevada forests, commissioned and funded by Congress, found that “more than any other human activity, logging has increased the risk and severity of fires by removing the cooling shade of trees and leaving flammable debris.” These logging-caused forest fires cost lives, as well as several hundred million dollars of taxpayer money each year in forest fire-fighting expenses.
- **The U.S. doesn’t need the timber cut on federal lands.** Less than 5% of our nation’s timber supply comes from national forests, while one out of every two trees cut in this country is wasted through inefficient utilization and lack of recycling. We simply don’t need to log public forests for our timber supply. We need only be less wasteful.

At this time, sixty-eight environmental organizations including the Sierra Club, have endorsed H.R. 2789, yet only fourteen House members have co-sponsored the legislation. Congressman Maurice Hinchey (NY-26th) [currently NY-22nd] is not one of them. I am sure he would appreciate hearing your views about this important legislation. [Note: Congressman Hinchey endorsed the legislation two-and-a-half years after publication of this article, during summer 2000.]

Do not be disheartened by accusations that this monumental legislation is “unrealistic” or “has no chance for passage.” Remember other social movements, the campaigns for woman suffrage and slavery abolition among them, which at their inception appeared to hold little prospect for success. We are still at the beginning of the campaign to redefine the purposes of our national forests, to reclaim them from the timber corporations that manipulate our elected officials and government agencies for their own advantage. Let us have patience and perseverance.