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Bush's "Healthy Forest Initiative": Smokescreen for Raising Timber Industry Profits

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Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching

Catastrophic fires in western forests were big news across the nation last summer. In their aftermath Bush administration officials and legislative supporters of the timber industry have called for increased logging as the way to reduce such fires in the future. In evaluating the administration's plan let's begin by considering the nature of these fires. Let's examine a few arguments for the enactment of this legislation.

First of all, fire is a natural part of western forest ecology. Even catastrophic fires are not abnormal, although they were much less frequent than in recent years. In "natural forests," not the "tree plantations" our national forests have been turned into by timber companies, frequent "cool" fires thin out the younger trees, leaving the more mature ones relatively unscathed. The survivors enjoy increased viability due to reduced competition for nutrients, light and water. Their ability to resist insects and disease is hence increased. These fires also help to fertilize the forests by releasing nutrients trapped in dead material that has fallen to the forest floor.

Second, many ecologists say that long-term, irresponsible logging practices such as removing the largest, most fire-resistant trees, while leaving slash, brush and dense young stands of forest behind have essentially stoked the nation's wildfires.

Certainly, danger of fire to human health should be minimized. But is fire reduction a likely consequence of the Bush administration's "Healthy Forest Initiative" and similar approaches introduced in the last Congress? Let's take a look.

In all likelihood the administration's plan would perpetuate and intensify catastrophic fires. Rather than investing funds in removing small diameter trees and underbrush it would allow the Forest Service to enter into long-term contracts with logging companies to cut large, fire-resistant trees in remote areas to pay for hazardous fuel work.

The administration's proposal would also overhaul the Northwest Forest Plan to allow more logging of ancient forests by removing administrative obstacles, including provisions intended to protect sensitive and imperiled species, key salmon watersheds and old-growth forests. This part of the plan is not limited to fuel reduction projects and suggests that the administration is only interested in cutting more ancient forests in the region.

Also, the rights of citizens to appeal and litigate destructive timber sales, such as the continued logging of ancient ponderosa pine forests on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, would likewise be eliminated or restricted.

The administration has blamed environmentalists for last year's wildfires by claiming that appeals and litigation have blocked logging operations that would have reduced the risk of catastrophic fires. This has been part of the administration's argument for limiting the public's ability to participate in logging decisions. Yet, a recent Government Accounting Office report found that only 1% of the Forest Service's fuel reduction projects were appealed in 2001 and none were litigated. The administration's blaming of environmentalists is thus nothing more than a smokescreen to blind the public to the real purpose of the "Healthy Forest Initiative": to gut environmental laws and limit public participation in the management of our national forests, thereby giving timber companies the best opportunity since the Salvage Logging Rider of 1995 to fill their pockets at the expense of our environment's health.

The past congressional session saw several attempts to implement the administration's forest plan. Senators Larry Craig (R-ID) and Pete Domenici (R-NM) introduced an amendment to the 2003 Interior Appropriations Bill that included most of the plan's provisions. That and similar efforts were blocked, but we can expect an attempt in the current Congress to enact the same provisions.

What is really needed in a fire reduction plan is an increase in funding for brush reduction within and adjacent to residential communities. The Forest Service's own science shows that if simple steps are taken to reduce the flammability of homes and their immediate surroundings within 200 feet, they will be protected even from severe fires. Wood shingle roofs should be replaced with fire-retardant material and brush should be cleared near houses.

To truly safeguard our national forests and the people who live near them ask your senators and representatives to

- oppose legislation that suspends environmental laws or judicial review,
- oppose legislation that limits judicial review,
- oppose legislation that allows federal agencies to ignore cumulative impacts of logging,
- support legislation that focuses fuel reduction activities close to homes and communities,
- support legislation that adequately funds legitimate fuel reduction projects that do not rely on logging large, fire-resistant trees.