

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony on H.R. 2458

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Before the

House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

September 23, 1997

Chairman Chenoweth, thank you for this opportunity to testify. The Western Ancient Forest Campaign (WAFC) represents organizations and individuals nationwide who are dedicated to protecting forest and aquatic ecosystems on the National Forests.

WAFC strongly opposes H.R. 2458 and urges the Members of this Committee and the House of Representatives to oppose the bill and its objectionable elements in any form.

While the environmental community supports protecting lives and property in the wildlands urban interface threatened by fire, there is no scientific evidence that increasing logging will accomplish that goal. This bill, if enacted, would allow for uncontrolled logging that may actually increase fire-risk and threaten other important values such as public safety, clean water supplies, fish and wildlife habitat, recreational opportunity and fiscal responsibility.

This bill would eliminate the rights of local communities and concerned citizens to participate in management decisions and to be fully informed about management choices and their relative impacts. The creation of a new forest management credit program will only lead to further revenue losses for the timber sale program and would exacerbate the problem of the Forest Service literally giving away trees from our National Forests with no return to the taxpayer. Finally, the section concerning the use of grazing to remove excess grasses and to improve forest health contradicts substantial data that grazing causes significant harm to the environment and can increase fire risks.

There is no conclusive scientific data that indicates forests can be successfully fireproofed by thinning. While anecdotal reports about some fires support this contention, other fires have burned everything in their path, including recently thinned areas. The Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project reported to Congress that logging "increases fire hazard by increasing surface dead fuels and changing microclimate." Given the lack of confirming scientific data, limited pilot projects already underway by the Forest Service should be intensively monitored and researched to see if this strategy works and under what conditions before it is employed on a broader basis.

Flawed Findings

WAFC disagrees with some the fundamental assumptions found in the bill's findings section. For example, in Sec. 2 (2) the bill states the forests are experiencing significant disease epidemics and insect infestation. The U.S.. Forest Service testified June 19 before the House Agriculture that there is no forest health crisis on the

National Forests. Disease and insects, like wildfire are natural parts of a functioning ecosystem.

Sec. 2 (3) blames inconsistent management and natural effects for the buildup of fuels, but there is substantial evidence that fire suppression on which the government spends nearly \$1 billion per year, the selective logging of larger, more fire-tolerant trees and cattle grazing which is also subsidized by the taxpayer are the primary causes of overly dense forest conditions. Nothing in this bill addresses these fundamental causes and in fact the bill's promotion of cattle grazing could make the overstocking problem worse in some regions.

The definition for wildland/urban interface area is inadequate because it does not define "close proximity" or "other property" which would allow the Forest Service overly broad discretion to define the interface area. The bill also allows other kinds of management activities besides fuels treatments. Section 101 (a) (2) requires the agency to include areas with other forest management needs.

Suspension of Environmental Laws and Public Review

The NEPA exclusion clause in Sec. 101 (b) will prevent meaningful public participation in designating lands for management activities that may be very near communities. Also, by failing to conduct an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement, other important values found in our National Forests may be destroyed or impaired by management activities authorized and funded by this bill.

For example, landslides and flooding, which have killed people and destroyed property, have been linked to roadbuilding and clearcutting. Under this bill, there will be no protection (or even the opportunity to comment) for communities or property owners who could be put at risk by the logging and roadbuilding projects in areas with steep or unstable slopes. Similarly, recreational interests would not be allowed to comment on projects that could adversely affect hunting, fishing or hiking near their communities.

In general, the environmental community opposes legislation that undermines fundamental environmental laws like the National Environmental Policy Act. Under the Salvage Logging Rider, when the NEPA and other procedural laws were suspended, environmentally harmful timber sales were logged despite a massive public outcry.

A New Subsidy for the Timber Industry

WAFC strongly opposes the provision for "Forest Management Credits" found in Section 101 (b). The Clinton Administration has proposed an end to the purchaser credit program because it subsidizes logging road construction and the House voted to cut the program in half. Forest Management Credits would create a new subsidy that could lead to even less money being returned to the Treasury from a timber program that is already losing hundreds of millions of dollars every year.

The "Cost Considerations" provision in Sect. 101 (f) would allow the Forest Service to ignore all economic considerations when conducting timber sales under this bill and specifically states that "no sale shall be precluded because the costs of the sale may exceed the revenues derived from the sale." This section would also obfuscate the extent of money losing timber sales by allowing the Forest Service to exclude these sales from any calculations concerning the revenue of the timber sale program. In other words, the Forest Service would be granted a blank check and the agency would not even have to worry about keeping track of how much taxpayer money is being lost.

A better approach for finding necessary projects is to appropriate the money in the annual Interior Appropriations process. If the threat to public safety warrants, it is our belief Congress should provide adequate funding, not promote the giveaway of the public's assets as this bill does.

Grazing Harms Forests and Streams

WAFC also strongly opposes Section 201 concerning re-innovation of grasses and forbs because there is significant evidence grazing is harmful to forests and streams and that it contributes to overstocking conditions in some forests. Enclosed for the record is a scientific report entitled "Effects of Livestock Grazing, on Stand Dynamics and Soils in Upland Forests of the Interior West," by A. Joy Belsky and Dana M. Blumenthal concluding that grazing has substantially contributed to overstocking and changes in tree species composition. Similar studies conducted by the Forest Service have come to the same conclusions for Southwest forests.

Allowing for new contract authority outside of the normal grazing allotment system will allow activities to take place without adequate environmental review. Further, this program would also be a costly subsidy to an already subsidized industry.

Conclusion: Oppose H.R. 2458

In conclusion, the agency has adequate existing authority to carry out necessary activities in the interface zone to protect lives and property. This bill calls for uncontrolled logging that may increase fire-risk and threaten other important values such as public safety, clean water supplies, fish and wildlife habitat, recreational opportunity and fiscal responsibility. Western Ancient Forest Campaign will actively oppose H. R. 2458 and urge the Members of this Committee to vote against its passage. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

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