



[Interior, Congress wage turf battle over timber contracts](#)

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Three Western congressmen are pushing legislation that would extend federal contracts for timber companies trying to ride out the tough homebuilding market, but administration officials want more say in the process.

H.R. 3759 would require the Interior Department to grant three-year extensions to its timber contracts with private companies that have become economically inviable because of the slumping economy.

The Forest Service has guidelines allowing it to extend contracts for economic reasons, but Interior only allows contracts to be extended because of natural disasters and other non-economic factors.

Many of Interior's current contracts were negotiated during a period of high timber prices in the middle of the decade, but with demand slumping amid the stalled homebuilding industry, the companies say they can no longer harvest the timber at a profit.

To keep the companies from going under, Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) wants to quickly pass the bill, but he hit a snag from the Obama administration yesterday during a hearing of the National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee.

Compelling Interior to grant an extension on economic grounds to any timber company that requests one makes the bill "problematic," said Bureau of Land Management Assistant Director Ed Roberson. The administration does not oppose the extensions nor the intent of the bill but wants the Interior secretary to be able to review them on a case-by-case basis.

DeFazio balked, saying the added authority would allow Interior to "dither" during a rulemaking process while timber companies went under. "You're asking for something, and I'm not sure I want to give it to you because time is of the essence," he said.

DeFazio got support from frequent adversary Rep. Rob Bishop (R-Utah). Last week, Bishop and DeFazio squared off over DeFazio's plan to create a western Oregon wilderness area, but yesterday the two were in lock-step.

"Why should we give you that discretion?" Bishop asked Roberson. "Doesn't that open you up to all sorts of charges of favoritism and abuse of the system?"

Montana Republican Dennis Rehberg and Oregon Democrat Kurt Schrader are co-sponsors of the bill.

Roberson promised an expedited process in which extension requests were answered

within 90 days. "There will not be any dithering," he said. "The secretary's full attention is on this."

Both parties agreed to work closely to resolve the issue, and DeFazio said he wanted it done as soon as possible, as he intends to push the bill to the House floor soon for a "noncontroversial" suspension vote.

Devil in details for Wash. wilderness, ski hill bill

The administration gave conditional support for H.R. 1769 from Rep. Dave Reichert (R-Wash.), which to expand the Alpine Lakes Wilderness near Seattle and designate segments of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River and Pratt River as wild and scenic rivers.

But it also wants to work with the bill's backers to ensure the bill's accompanying designation of a stretch of the Snoqualmie river does not interfere with an in-design road project, said Jim Bedwell, director of recreation and heritage resources for the Forest Service.

The administration also supported a bill that would allow ski areas in national forests to accommodate infrastructure for year-round outdoor activities, but again had minor concerns. H.R. 2476 must be properly written to ensure that only outdoor-based activities are permitted, lest national forests be filled with skate-parks and tennis courts, Bedwell said.

Other bills

The administration supported H.R. 3804 from Rep. Paul Tonko (D-N.Y.) to make a variety of technical corrections to various laws affecting the National Park Service and extend certain agency authorities, such as the National Park Service Concessions Management Advisory Board. It also would adjust ticketing at Pearl Harbor and make administrative changes at several other parks.

It supported H.R. 3388 from Rep. Randy Forbes (R-Va.) to adjust the boundaries of Petersburg National Battlefield in Virginia and H.R. 3603 from Rep. Jim Marshall (D-Ga.) to rename the Ocmulgee National Monument as the "Ocmulgee Mounds National Monument."

The administration supported H.R. 765, which would establish the Nellis Dunes National Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area. Under the bill, from Rep. Dean Heller (R-Nev.), Interior would convey approximately 1,150 acres of land to Clark County for a centralized off-highway vehicle recreation park. It would also transfer a parcel from BLM to the Department of the Air Force for use by Nellis Air Force Base.

But the administration had a few problems and requested the bill's proponents clarify the land in question and withdraw the area from mining claims.

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