



An E&E Publishing Service

## **APPROPRIATIONS:**

### **Green groups oppose funding for farm bill's streamlined logging**

Wednesday, May 7, 2014

Phil Taylor, E&E reporter

Nearly 50 environmental groups and individuals this week sent a letter to Senate appropriators asking that they provide no funding for a farm bill program designed to expedite treatments of forests threatened by insects and disease.

The letter spearheaded by WildEarth Guardians, Conservation Congress and Rocky Smith, a forest-policy analyst, warns that the farm bill program would exclude the public from the management of federal forests and likely spark preventable lawsuits.

"This section is based on controversial science, prevents public engagement, and is likely to lead to increased litigation and decreased health of our national forests," the groups wrote to Sens. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) and Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), the chairman and ranking member, respectively, of the Senate Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee.

The expedited authority, tucked deep in the farm bill, is strongly backed by the wood products industry and was authored, in part, by Sen. Michael Bennet (D-Colo.).

It would allow the Forest Service to approve logging and restoration projects up to 3,000 acres under streamlined National Environmental Policy Act reviews known as categorical exclusions, as long as strict environmental standards are met and the project is planned in collaboration with diverse stakeholders.

Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell said his agency expects to soon identify millions of acres of forestlands for potential treatments under the authority (*Greenwire*, May 1). The farm bill authorized up to \$200 million annually for the program, though it's unclear whether Congress will appropriate any money.

But signatories to this week's letter complained that the language included in the farm bill is too broad and open to interpretation. It would also reduce accountability by potentially denying the opportunity for public comment and administrative appeals.

"This will likely lead to an increase in litigation, as it would be the only option for citizens to air their concerns about proposed projects," the groups wrote.

Moreover, the Forest Service already has authority to swiftly approve projects that clear dead and dying trees from near homes and other critical infrastructure, they argued. Similar, broader authority is not needed in the backcountry, they added.

Other prominent environmental groups including the Nature Conservancy have taken no position on the farm bill provision. In Montana, groups including Montana Trout Unlimited and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition worked with Gov. Steve Bullock (D) to help identify potential lands for treatments, which angered some environmental groups that felt they were left out.

Proponents of the farm bill authority say the status quo, in which tens of millions of acres of Western forests has been afflicted by bark beetles and other forests face an array of ongoing threats due to drought, warmer winters, dense and even-aged stands, and regulatory paralysis, is unacceptable.

"Doing nothing on our diseased national forests is not an option, but we will work with anyone who has concerns over the provision to make sure it's implemented in an environmentally sound way," said Bennet spokesman Adam Bozzi.