

Rural County Representatives of California Reports Bipartisan Forestry Reform Bill Introduced in the U.S. Senate

Sierra Sun Times
October 20, 2017

October 20, 2017 - This week, U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Washington), Ranking Member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, introduced a bipartisan proposal to reform forest management and wildfire funding. The Wildland Fires Act of 2017 is co-sponsored by Senator James Risch (R-Idaho), Senator Ron Wyden (D-Oregon), Senator Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), and Senator Patricia Murray (D-Washington). The bill provides up to \$100 million in funding for at-risk communities, establishes a pilot program that instructs the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service) and Department of the Interior to treat high risk forest lands, provides stability for long term restoration projects on federal lands, and authorizes agencies to use surplus wildfire suppression money to fund forest thinning and additional management projects that reduce risk to wildfire. The proposal was immediately endorsed by several environmental and forestry groups who praised the bill as non-controversial, science-based, and impactful.

This bipartisan coalition of western senators is simultaneously pressing Senate leaders to include the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (S. 1842) in the disaster supplemental package passed by the House of Representatives last week. A letter signed by Senators Cantwell, Risch, Wyden, Crapo, and Murray, along with Senator Kamala Harris (D-California), Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-California), Senator Jeff Merkley (D-Oregon), Senator Michael Bennet (D-Colorado), and Senator Jon Tester (D-Montana) was submitted to leadership requesting that a fix to “fire-borrowing” be included in the disaster relief bill. The bill currently includes \$576.6 million in relief provisions for victims of wildfires, but as the west continues to burn from a historic fire season, Senators are seeking a permanent fix for the funding shortages that have plagued the Forest Service in recent years. Despite the effort put forth by this bipartisan coalition, the rest of the chamber is primed to move forward with the disaster supplemental in its current form. Congress is under pressure to pass the funding package before the National Flood Insurance Program reaches its \$30.4 billion statutory debt ceiling, and a vote on the Senate Floor is expected early next week. Given this short time frame, it is unlikely that leadership will consider inserting the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act into the disaster supplemental; however, President Trump indicates there will be a third relief package which will provide western Senators with another opportunity.

Lawmakers hoped to pass disaster relief legislation this week, but the vote was pushed back when the final steps of the budget-writing process took longer than anticipated. The Senate’s work week was off to a slow start when the Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, Senator Thad Cochran (R-Mississippi), experienced health-related challenges and was unable to return to Washington, D.C., delaying markups for key spending bills. Despite some significant differences surrounding the politics of

moving the budget process forward, it is expected that the majority party will successfully pass a budget resolution that will pave the way for \$1.5 trillion in tax cuts. Proponents of the Farm Bill are relieved that the majority party in the U.S. Senate are voting on a budget resolution without a major reduction to Farm Bill spending. This was a victory for rural and agriculture communities who watched the House introduce a budget resolution earlier this year with \$10 billion in required cuts for farm bill programs.

Source: RCRC

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