

Rural County Representatives of California Reports Bills Move as Congressional Focus on Wildfire Prevention Intensifies

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November 4, 2017 - This week, the U.S. House of Representatives approved legislation to streamline environmental reviews of forest management practices on federally managed lands in order to enhance wildfire prevention efforts nationwide. H.R. 2936, also known as the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017, is the latest bill introduced by Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-AR) to tackle wildfire prevention and forest management on federal forest lands after a previous version of the bill stalled in the Senate last Congress.

While H.R. 2936 would streamline certain environmental review requirements, such as those contained in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), speeding up the ability of federal land managers to respond to urgent wildfire prevention needs, the Administration has asked for modifications to provisions in the bill that would revise the Stafford Act and force competition for funding between wildfires on federal land and other disasters such as hurricanes. The Administration has suggested the bill be amended to create an annual cap adjustment for wildfire suppression operations to resolve those concerns. RCRC has not taken a position on H.R. 2936 due to concerns with the Stafford Act revisions.

In addition to passing H.R. 2936, last night the House approved H.R. 2921, the National Forest System Vegetation Management Pilot Program Act of 2017, under a suspension of the rules. The bill was introduced by Rep. Kevin Cramer (R-ND-At Large) and authorizes pilot programs for better protecting utility infrastructure in national forests from wildfires and overgrowth.

In the meantime, two additional bills have been introduced in the Senate to address wildfire prevention and forest management practices, although neither has yet seen action. First, Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA) introduced S. 1991, the Wildland Fires Act of 2017, which focuses on funding for communities that are at-risk for wildfire including local governments, authorizes longer-term contracts to provide stability to companies involved in restoration projects on federal land, and authorizes federal agencies to re-purpose unused wildfire suppression funds to conduct preparedness projects to get ahead of the problem.

Additionally, members of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works have

released a staff draft of the Wildfire Prevention and Mitigation Act of 2017, which seeks to create categorical exclusions for immediate action in critical wildfire response situations, streamlines environmental review for ecosystem restoration projects, and establishes a five-year pilot arbitration process to allow alternative dispute resolution for forest activities that will result in binding decisions not subject to judicial review. RCRC is supporting both bills as common-sense methods to increase forest restoration and management activities for wildfire prevention. RCRC's support letters can be accessed here:

S 1991

Draft Wildfire Prevention Legislation

There are additional avenues for forestry and wildfire funding reform, including the Forestry Title of the 2018 Farm Bill, the omnibus, or other bipartisan standalone proposals, including S. 1842. The best opportunity for comprehensive forestry reform is standalone legislation, however, it remains to be seen how the White House's dismissal of disaster relief for wildfire funding will impact legislative negotiations moving forward. Source: Rural County Representatives of California.

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