

Committees discuss forest management and wildfire mitigation

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The U.S. Forest Service estimates that up to 60 million acres of our national forests are at a high to very high risk of catastrophic wildfire. In 2017 alone, wildfires have burned more than 8 million acres of land in the United States and suppression costs have exceeded \$2.3 billion, making it the most expensive year on record. On September 27, both the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works and the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held hearings to address this pressing issue and explore methods of restoring the health and resiliency of national forests as well as mitigate the threat of catastrophic wildfires.

The House hearing focused on the need for improved forest management practices and potential solutions to reduce the federal government's fire suppression costs, such as commercial thinning, harvesting selected trees to reduce the density of forests, improving intergovernmental coordination, and leveraging partnership opportunities. In the Senate hearing, specialists in forest management testified about the destructive effects that wildfires have on the environment and economy and offered strategies to reduce the likelihood and damage of wildfires. The suggestions ranged from expanding Good Neighbor Authority in the Agricultural Act of 2014, to using categorical exclusions in designated Insect and Disease Areas. Senators Orrin Hatch (R-UT), John Thune (R-SD), Jon Tester (D-MT), and Steve Daines, (R-MT) also advocated for three wildfire-related bills that they previously introduced: the Sage-Grouse and Mule Deer Habitat Conservation and Restoration Act 2017 (S.1417), the Forest Management Improvement Act of 2017 (S.1731), and the Litigation Relief for Forest Management Projects Act (S.605). Earlier this year, the House passed the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017 (H.R.2936), introduced by Representative Bruce Westerman (R-AR-4) to improve forest management activities. In the Senate, the National Flood Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2017 (S.1571), sponsored by Senators Mike Crapo (R-ID) and Sherrod Brown (D-OH), includes a wildfire funding solution that allows for the declaration of a major natural disaster for wildfire on federal lands. The bill proposes treating wildfires like natural disasters and tapping a disaster relief fund to cover suppression. It was referred to the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs on July 17, but no further action has been taken.

Sources: Library of Congress, U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
