

Congress considers legislation to improve forest management in wake of recent wildfires

November 16, 2017

In response to the catastrophic wildfires in 2017 thus far, and the escalating costs of battling fire-related damages, Congress is fielding legislation to promote forest management techniques that would return resilience to overgrown, fire-prone forested lands. On November 1, the House passed H.R.2936, the Resilient Federal Forests Act, by a vote of 232-188. Sponsored by Representative Bruce Westerman (R-AR-4), the bill would expedite reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and improve forest management activities on National Forest System lands and public lands. The legislation would expand categorical exclusions for the review of forest management projects under NEPA, in order to expedite certain critical response actions. In addition, it would establish an arbitration process pilot program to handle objections to forest management projects, and a State-Supported Forest Management Fund to cover the cost of planning, carrying out, and monitoring certain forest management activities. The bill would also allow for the declaration of a major disaster for wildfires on federal lands. The following day, Senator John Barrasso (R-WY) introduced S.2068, the Wildfire Prevention and Mitigation Act of 2017, to discourage litigation against the Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) relating to land management projects, and to speed up the permitting process for forest thinning projects aiming to reduce wildfire risks. Unlike the Resilient Federal Forests Act, this legislation does not include a budget fix to end fire borrowing at the Forest Service. On November 16, Senator Steve Daines (R-MT) introduced related legislation titled S.2160, the Protect Collaboration for Healthier Forests Act. This bill includes a regional approach to settle disputes over forest management projects, and sets up a binding arbitration pilot project as an alternative dispute resolution process in lieu of judicial review.

Source: Library of Congress
