

## Resilient Federal Forests Act Would Benefit Forests and Communities

Posted by [John Greene](#) on July 6, 2017

Recently, Congressman Bruce Westerman (R-AR)—the only forester currently serving in congress—re-introduced H.R. 2936, the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017. Rep. Westerman previously introduced The Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015 [H.R. 2647] over two years ago. It moved quickly through the House and passed by a 262-167 vote that included the support of 21 Democrats who crossed the aisle, but it was not considered in the Senate.

The new bill recently cleared its first hurdle in the House Natural Resources committee on a 23-12 party line vote, and the House is expected to vote on it next month.

Much like the 2015 version, the new bill would serve to protect the national forest system by implementing proactive management standards intended to diminish the threat of wildfires and other risks, which couldn't come at a more opportune time.

Rep. Westerman continues to draw attention to the fact that devastating fires also consume a huge chunk of the federal Forest Service budget. Over the last 10 years, the Forest Service has spent an average of \$1.13 billion on annual suppression operations and the agency has been forced to leverage funds from other land management programs to assist in this effort.

Fires are responsible for these exorbitant costs as well as the potential for loss of life, destruction of millions of acres and the displacement of wildlife, and the agency has asked Congress for help in addressing the problem of wildfire funding.

If passed, H.R. 2936 would:

- Enable federal officials to quickly implement salvage operations and reforestation efforts in the case of a disaster, bypassing lengthy environmental studies and reviews that are typically required.
- The legislation would expand the forested area that could be thinned with less rigorous environmental reviews from 3,000 acres to 10,000 acres. This higher limit would apply to areas at risk of wildfire because of disease or recent fires.
- In cases where various agencies and local authorities are collaborating on forest management projects, the area eligible for “categorical exclusions” could be up to 30,000 acres.
- Speed up the regulatory process on forest management projects and make it more difficult for environmentalists to block them. Judges would no longer be allowed to issue restraining orders or preliminary injunctions to halt salvage operations or reforestation efforts after large fires or other catastrophic events.
- Provide the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management access to funds to fight fires from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (which coordinates responses to disasters like hurricanes) if their budgets for fighting wildfires are exhausted. Under the current system, the Forest Service often has to reallocate money budgeted for other programs to pay for wildfire costs, a practice referred to as “fire borrowing.”

“For far too long, our nation’s forests have been fighting a battle for survival. The conflict is not with logging but with the effects of reactive versus proactive management which has resulted in costly confrontations with wildfire, disease, and insects. In 2015, a record 10.1 million acres burned due to wildfires,” Rep. Westerman said. “This bill would utilize tools already available to the U.S. Forest Service

“This legislation will streamline the permitting process for proactive thinning projects while simultaneously ensuring reforestation activities,” said Western Caucus Chairman and co-sponsor of the bill, Paul Gosar (R-AZ). “Inter-agency dysfunction and frivolous lawsuits from environmental extremist groups have plagued forest management long enough. This bipartisan bill will not only strengthen collaboration between the federal government and local stakeholders, but will also improve forest health for generations to come.”

Despite opposition from environmental groups, largely over the perceived softening of environmental review procedures, Westerman believes the greatest challenge will be in convincing some Western Democratic senators to support the measure. “That's where I see the biggest obstacle,” Westerman noted. “I really, really hope some of those Democratic senators out West will realize that this will be good for the environment, good for the economy, and they should really get on board and support this bill.”

Due to decades of poor forest management and regulation, much of the Western US is now a tinderbox of pent up fuel for wildfire. Rather than just continuing to throw good money after bad, endangering the lives of thousands of firefighters and civilians alike, and depleting the Forest Service of its funding and resources, it's time to address the root causes of the problem in the West. Rep. Westerman's Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017 will ultimately benefit America's forests, as well as the industries and communities that care for and depend on them.