



FEDERAL FOREST

RESOURCE COALITION

FFRC Weekly Report for Friday, June 29, 2018

Senate Farm Bill, With Slim Forestry Title, Heads to Conference: The Senate Thursday approved a bipartisan Farm Bill by a vote of 86 to 11, setting up a contentious conference with the House. The Senate forestry title has one new legislated CE, some wood promotion provisions, and a few other items. The House title, in contrast has 11 new CE's and numerous other NEPA streamlining provisions.

Of course, the Farm Bill never turns on the forestry title (at least it hasn't yet). The Senate bill focuses on bolstering farm income support programs and retaining a large conservation program that is intended to achieve conservation results (while bolstering farm income). Many commodity prices are at or near historic lows, prompting calls to bolster the farm "safety net." The real fight will be over SNAP, known more widely as food stamps. The House bill includes stringent work requirements for able bodied adults who are not raising small children, while the Senate bill does not.

The Senate process was chaotic, with only two managers amendments adopted, including one to reduce liability for utility operators with rights of way through the National Forests. The bill was held up over a disputed provision dealing with Cuban trade, and the final vote was called late Thursday evening within a few hours of settling that question. Conferees will be named after the Fourth of July Recess, and the conference will likely drag on through the summer.

Speaking of Summer in Washington:

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced earlier this month he was cancelling most of the traditional August recess, primarily to keep confirming President Trump's nominees. Naturally, Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) and Sen. Jeff Flake (R-AZ) hinted they may place holds on nominees unless the Senate votes to reverse tariffs the President put in place for "national security" reasons.

One of those nominees is Jim Hubbard, the President's pick to serve as Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment. If confirmed this summer, he'd take office late in the second year of the Trump Presidency. And with one third of the Senate up for reelection this fall and a vacancy on the Supreme Court, a lot of time will be spent grandstanding, rather than voting on overdue nominations...

We're still expecting the Forest Service to formally release an updated NEPA handbook for public comment. That is, unless the bureaucracy grinds that process to halt. That handbook revision will unfold in parallel with an ongoing "forest products modernization" effort, and efforts to rapidly implement the provisions of the March 2018 Omnibus Bill, which fixed fire funding and provided new management authorities.

Also potentially up next month is action from the Senate Environment & Public Works Committee to modernize the Endangered Species Act. We're not certain of the level of enthusiasm for that effort, but time will tell.

House Panel Discusses Road Closures While Lacking Forest Service Representation:

On Tuesday, June 26th the House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on the Interior, Energy and Environment held a hearing on the access to public lands and effect of forest service road closures. Chairman Greg Gianforte (R-MT) noted that "the Forest Service has closed more than 21,000 miles of roads [just in Montana] since the 1990s, nearly one third of all Forest Service roads in the state." This has resulted, he said, in limited access and prevents the people from using Federal lands. He noted reduced access for a variety of uses, including grazing and recreation, and asserted that fires were harder to control due to reduced access. You can read witness testimony and watch an archived video of the hearing [at this link](#).

The Committee heard from four witnesses: Montana State Representative Kerry White, Baker County (Oregon) Commission Chair Bill Harvey, California Off-Road Vehicle Association Managing Director Amy Granat, and Jim Furnish, a retired Forest Service official from the Clinton Administration era. The Committee discussed how the closure of public roads and restricted access to Forest Service lands impact local government, small-town economies, recreational activities, daily life, and tourism. Witnesses testified to problems with the travel management plans (developed entirely during the Obama administration), and the consequences are of losing public land and the role it has played in their local economies.

Rep. Paul Gosar (R-AZ) hinted that the road closures could be at least partially responsible for the catastrophic wildfires happening across the country, especially in Arizona. Gosar criticized the panel of witnesses, noting the lack of current Forest Service expertise. "Let's have another hearing, and next time we need representatives from the Forest Service so they can be held responsible for their actions," said Gosar.

Travel management plans were developed over the course of the Obama Administration. While a great deal of public outreach was done, many local people feel that these plans were biased towards road closures and reduced access, and in many cases the Forest Service and local authorities clashed over which roads to keep open, and – in extreme cases – which roads were under which agency's jurisdiction. The Trump administration has left these travel management plans in place, for the most part, and has recommended a 59 percent reduction in road funding. This hardly seems like a budget focused on retaining access to public lands.

Upcoming Events:

Congress is on recess next week, so we won't be publishing a weekly report. We'll resume publication on Friday, July 13th.



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