
Senators ask Obama for forest stimulus funding



[JOHN SOWELL](#),

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden is seeking the support of President Barack Obama in adding at least \$1.52 billion in funding over a two-year period to remove hazardous fuel loads in the nation's forests.

Last week, Wyden, chairman of the Senate Public Lands and Forests Subcommittee, authored a letter calling on the new president to include money in his stimulus package for lowering fuel loads and other forest restoration projects.

The U.S. Forest Service recently identified \$2.75 billion worth of hazardous fuel reduction projects appropriate for the stimulus program. Funding at that level would create 50,000 jobs nationally, with a large number coming to Oregon because of its high percentage of federal forests, Wyden said.

"In Oregon, this funding will create good, family-wage jobs in the rural communities that face the greatest threats from catastrophic forest fires due to millions of acres of unhealthy, choked, overstocked forests," Wyden said. "We are reminding President Obama that it's not just urban areas that are hit hard by this recession."

Between 2006 and 2008, Oregon lost 17 percent of its wood products manufacturing and logging jobs, he said.

Wyden said that 1.4 million acres of forest lands that have already

undergone required environmental review could be treated immediately. Another 5 million acres could be ready for treatment within a year, he said.

Last year, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior, which oversees the Bureau of Land Management, spent nearly \$2 billion on fire suppression costs. Through thinning projects and other forest restoration measures, those costs could be cut in half within five years, Wyden said.

“Many forest experts agree that we need to act quickly to save our nation’s forests from imminent destruction,” Wyden wrote in the letter. “As they face increasing pressures from a changing climate and expanding insect populations, many of our nation’s most majestic landscapes are themselves threatened by the failure to address forest health concerns. These projects will help ensure that these forests will be around for future generations to enjoy.”

The letter was signed by fellow Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley, Idaho Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch, Washington Sen. Maria Cantwell and California Sen. Diane Feinstein, along with Sens. Jon Tester of Montana, Tim Johnson of North Dakota and Tom Udall of New Mexico.

Two other senators, Max Baucus of Montana, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, signed the letter as well.

“These projects have a proven track-record of quickly creating jobs in rural communities — places hard hit by the recession and where people are likely to rapidly return a large portion of their wages to the economy,” the letter said. “The projects would also lead to significant cost savings in the long-term as the reduction of the hazardous fuel loads and the restoration of forest health would help prevent uncharacteristic and costly wildfires.”

Increased thinning is part of Wyden’s proposed Oregon Forest Restoration and Old Growth Protection Act, which would halt logging of trees in west side forests that are 120 years or older and trees at least 150 years old on the east side of the state.

That act would also prohibit clear-cutting and cutting in inventoried roadless areas and would direct the Forest Service and the BLM to address fire and insect risks in forests, while promoting sustainable, ecologically sound wood production.

- You can reach reporter John Sowell at 957-4209 or by e-mail at jsowell@nrtoday.com.

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