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More Logging Won't Stop Wildfires

By CHAD T. HANSON and DOMINICK A. DELLASALA JULY 23, 2015



IN the fall of 2013, shortly after fire swept across 257,000 acres of forest and shrub lands near Yosemite National Park in California's Sierra Nevada, Republicans in the House of Representatives approved a bill that would have suspended environmental laws to increase logging in our national forests in the name of fire prevention and "restoration."

Fortunately, the legislation never made it out of Congress. But it is fire season again in the West and, predictably, House Republicans have struck again, passing a similar measure, almost entirely along party lines, that all but gives away public forests to logging companies. A similar bill promoted by three Western Republicans is now before the Senate.

Just as they did in 2013, supporters of this legislation are using the public's fear of forest fires to advance their agenda. They argue that overgrown and "unhealthy" forests raise the risk of wildfires, and that the government has been hampered by litigation and environmental reviews from allowing timber companies to thin forests to reduce the risk of fire.

Accordingly, this legislation would allow more logging on federal lands, including clear cutting, by exempting some logging from environmental reviews entirely, limiting oversight in other cases and making it much more difficult to challenge harmful logging projects in court.

The legislation is rooted in falsehoods and misconceptions.

Some of the bill's supporters claim that environmental laws regulating commercial logging have led to more intense fires. But, as we saw in the 2013 fire near Yosemite, known as the Rim Fire and one of the largest in California history, commercial logging and the clear-cutting of forests do not reduce fire intensity.

In the case of the Rim Fire, our research found that protected forest areas with no history of logging burned least intensely. There was a similar pattern in other large fires in recent years. Logging removes the mature, thick-barked, fire-resistant trees. The small trees planted in their place and the debris left behind by loggers act as kindling; in effect, the logged areas become combustible tree plantations that are poor wildlife habitat.

The bill's supporters also argue that increasing logging and clear-cutting will benefit wildlife. But decades of forest ecology research strongly link the logging of both unburned and burned forests to the declines of numerous wildlife species, most notably the imperiled spotted owl.

Recognizing these findings, some 250 scientists sent a letter to Congress in 2013 opposing a similar version of the current legislation. They predicted, correctly, that the Rim Fire would actually benefit many wildlife species and rejuvenate the forest ecosystem, provided that the burned expanses were not then cleared by loggers.

As it turned out, a team of scientists investigating wildlife use of those forest patches that burned at high intensity found a "rich habitat" for birds because of increases in native insects that serve as food.

And a recent [study](#) by biologists at the [Wild Nature Institute](#) found that California spotted owls stuck around after the Rim Fire, and that their use of burned areas, where they nest and forage, was actually higher than that of the unburned, old forests that are generally associated with these owls.

Since the Rim Fire, we have observed hundreds of naturally regenerating pine and fir seedlings per acre — many already knee-high — and rapidly growing oak saplings in the unlogged high-intensity burn patches. We observed far fewer seedlings in heavily logged sites, where logging tractors and the dragging of logs across fragile soils crushed regenerating trees.

In fact, there is an emerging consensus among ecologists that patches of high-intensity fire, where flames kill most or all of the trees, create one of the rarest, most threatened and most ecologically important wildlife habitats in Western conifer forests — a snag forest. Large dead trees, called snags, which proponents of the logging legislation want to remove, are especially important to forest renewal in anchoring soils, shading young conifers from intense sunlight and providing habitat for scores of insect-eating bats, birds and small mammals.

Contrary to widespread misconceptions, large fires burn mostly at low and moderate intensities. For example, only about 20 percent of the Rim Fire was high-intensity, and only a portion of the land involved was densely forested enough to create snag forest habitat. Moreover, current science indicates that we have less, not more, mixed-intensity wildland fire in our forests now than we did historically. Allowing more fires to burn in backcountry areas will help restore our forest ecosystems.

Of course, the combination of drought and hotter temperatures in the West presents real concerns for rural communities in and around these forests. But the only effective way to protect rural homes from fire is to reduce the flammability of the homes by building with fire-resistant materials and reducing vegetation within 200 feet or so. Continuing to spend over \$1 billion of taxpayer funds each year fighting mostly backcountry fires does not protect homes or drinking water reservoirs, and it unnecessarily puts firefighters at risk.

The great conifer forest ecosystems of the Western United States were born to burn. They are renewed by fire. Logging after a fire destroys a forest's ability to rejuvenate.

The Senate should reject this legislation, and [President Obama](#) should veto it if it reaches his desk.

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