

FOREST SERVICE:

Wyden slams agency for 'staggering' reduction in timber program

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Senate Energy and Natural Resources Chairman Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) yesterday blasted the Obama administration's projected reduction in timber harvests in 2014 and its request to significantly cut funding for hazardous fuels removal on national forests.

Wyden said the Forest Service's \$4.9 billion budget request for fiscal 2014 would be a "huge blow" to forest health and would counteract the agency's restoration goal of harvesting 3 billion board feet of timber a year.

"Today's budget -- both in terms of drastic decreases in the timber harvests that are proposed and the deep cuts to the hazardous fuels program with corresponding drops to the acres proposed to be treated -- seems to me to be very counterproductive to the work the agency must accomplish," Wyden said at a hearing.

The administration's budget seeks full funding for a popular collaborative restoration program and seeks increased funding for land acquisitions and private land easements ([Greenwire](#), April 11).

It requests \$201 million for hazardous fuels removal near communities, a decrease of \$116 million from current levels. Some additional hazardous fuels funding for backcountry areas would be included in the agency's integrated resource restoration budget, but it is unclear how much.

The budget's timber harvest goal is 2.38 billion board feet in 2014, down from a goal of 2.8 billion board feet in fiscal 2013 and down also from the 2.64 billion board feet that was actually harvested in 2012. The agency had previously set a goal of harvesting 3 billion board feet by 2014.

Wyden's criticism was echoed by Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), the committee's ranking member, who said the administration's funding priorities for the Forest Service more closely resemble those of the National Park Service than those of a multiple-use agency rich in timber resources.

"Our national forests are increasingly being managed like national parks -- areas in which no timber harvesting is permitted," Murkowski said, noting the budget's emphasis on tourism, recreation and ecosystem values. "I agree these are important, but I have to remind you that the fundamental tenet of multiple use also includes the development of our natural resources."

The hearing was no easy hike for Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell, but it was more cordial than a hearing last week before the House Natural Resources Committee to discuss bills to increase federal timber harvests, during which Republicans accused Tidwell's agency of trampling rural economic development.

Murkowski, who was born in Ketchikan, Alaska, said communities in the state's southeast, which historically depended on timber harvests from the Tongass National Forest, are "on economic life support."

She said the administration's proposal to combine several line items into an integrated resource restoration (IRR) fund -- which would include hazardous fuels removal, timber harvests and removal of fish barriers, among other programs -- "makes it more difficult to find out how and where funding is spent."

Murkowski is also the top Republican on the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee, which will help decide whether to honor the Forest Service's request to expand its IRR budget nationwide.

Tidwell acknowledged that "trade-offs" were made in the budget but said, "Overall, I believe this budget request is a good investment."

He touted proposals to permanently reauthorize stewardship contracting, provide nearly full funding for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program and accelerate timber projects through landscape-scale use of the National Environmental Policy Act in places including Arizona and the Black Hills of South Dakota.

The budget also requests an increase of \$13 million for research into broadening markets for forest products, he said.

He said the agency's timber harvest goals are conservative and that they don't take into effect administrative efficiencies it hopes to achieve. In a press release issued after the hearing, the Forest Service said it is still on track to harvest a projected 3 billion board feet of timber by the end of 2014.

But the reduction in hazardous fuels funding was a point of concern for the panel, particularly as it follows a 2012 wildfire season that saw the burning of more than 9 million acres -- the third-largest amount of land burned since the 1960s. Climate change is expected to intensify droughts in the West, where wildfire seasons already last a few months longer than they historically did.

Chris Topik, director of Restoring America's Forests for the Nature Conservancy and a former House Appropriations Committee aide, said the Forest Service's overall hazardous fuels request

is 24 percent less than the current funding level. Topik said he believes the agency intends to spend about \$50 million from its IRR budget on hazardous fuels removal in the backcountry.

The Interior Department's budget request for hazardous fuels in fiscal 2014 was cut in half, he said.

The reduction is a symptom of tight budgets, but it may also reflect a difference in policy between Congress and the White House.

For example, House Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Mike Simpson (R-Idaho) last week said the White House Office of Management and Budget had informed his staff that "there's no evidence that hazardous fuels reductions reduces the catastrophic fires," a point with which he took issue.

"I'm kind of going, what? You've got to be kidding me," he said. "Why OMB is doing this, I have no idea. Frankly, they're not the experts. Department of Interior is."

At a hearing last week, Simpson told then-Interior Secretary Ken Salazar that his agency's request to reduce hazardous fuels funding by \$87 million is "not addressing the long-term costs of fires."