

Could the infrastructure bill make wildfires worse?



BY ADAM ATON | 08/11/2021 07:11 AM EDT



A firefighter employed by J. Franco Reforestation works to extinguish a control burn, a preventative measure to protect a home located on North Valley Road, on Aug. 9 in Greenville, Calif. | David Odisho/Getty Images

CLIMATEWIRE | The West is burning, and Congress is responding with a fire hose of money.

The bipartisan infrastructure deal that advanced yesterday through the Senate would spend billions of dollars on wildfire policy, with much of it earmarked for cutting trees

and planting new ones.



Some experts warn that approach could backfire.

“The infrastructure package, as written, is wrongheaded on so many levels. It’s a climate change nightmare,” said Chad Hanson, a forest ecologist and co-founder of the John Muir Project.

The legislation has inflamed a long-running debate about how fire should coexist with forests — and humans.

Many state and federal officials blame recent wildfires on forests that are overloaded with dead vegetation. California alone saw some 130 million trees die in the last decade. Their solution, backed by the wood industry, is to remove that fuel from the forest before it burns.

That principle guides the infrastructure package. It provides more than \$1.9 billion for fuel reduction, with at least \$1.2 billion of that set aside for cutting down trees and clearing vegetation.

It also creates a new federal system for subsidizing sawmills and other wood processing facilities, along with \$400 million in new financial assistance. “Close proximity” to a sawmill would become a factor for agencies to consider when funding federal land restoration.

Critics say such logging is counterproductive to wildfire management. Timber

companies make the best money by harvesting big trees, but those are the ones most resilient to fire. The act of cutting trees leaves behind highly flammable waste vegetation. Logging equipment is a potential ignition source itself, as well as a notorious vector for combustible invasive grasses.

And the final destination for some of the wood — pellets for burning in biomass generators — is [worse for the climate than coal](#), critics say, meaning the policy could inadvertently worsen climate change, which exacerbates wildfires in the first place. (The carbon sequestration value of other wood products depends on several factors and is a matter of [scientific debate](#).)

“We cannot overcome the climate crisis if we increase logging in our forests. All that’s going to do is increase emissions, and it’s not going to curb fires,” said Hanson.

“We’re seeing this over and over again, these fires are just sweeping rapidly through these vast areas where they’ve done [tree] thinning. [Authorities] said they would do that to save the towns. We’ve seen how that’s worked out,” he added, mentioning the town of Greenville, Calif., which was destroyed last week in the Dixie Fire.

Other portions of the infrastructure bill reflect a legacy of misguided wildland firefighting tactics, said Tim Ingalsbee, executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics and Ecology.

For instance, it offers \$500 million for creating fuel breaks, which are strips of land cleared of vegetation to contain a fire.

But fuel breaks have proven ineffective in wildlands, because embers can travel so far on the wind, Ingalsbee said. He cited the 2017 Eagle Creek Fire in Oregon that jumped the Columbia River: “You can’t get a better fuel break than that.”

To make matters worse, fuel breaks that aren’t properly maintained can make fire spread more quickly.

California has cut thousands of miles of fuel breaks, many in remote areas. But companies have had little incentive to return to them, Ingalsbee said, because they’ve already logged the most valuable trees from those fire breaks.

“It’s the lack of maintenance that has doomed every one of these schemes,” he said.

But fire breaks do provide real defense around communities, as well as prescribed burns.

“The real crisis is not burning trees on top of a mountaintop in a wilderness area. It’s incinerated homes in communities,” Ingalsbee said.

Some portions of the infrastructure bill do earn widespread acclaim from across the forestry and conservation world.

It includes \$500 million for community wildfire defense grants, which could fund the projects most likely to protect homes and businesses. It includes another \$500 million for prescribed burns, which clear out the most combustible vegetation while retaining some of fire’s ecological benefits. It also funds more monitoring and research programs.

“We love this bill,” said Jad Daley, president and CEO of American Forests, one of the country’s oldest conservation groups.

Daley pointed to the legislation’s potential for planting trees. The Forest Service says its reforestation backlog is more than 1 million acres and growing.

The bill would provide \$200 million for revegetation, along with hundreds of millions of dollars more for mine reclamation, ecosystem restoration and other projects. It also would lift decades-old spending caps on revenue streams that fund tree planting.

The bill’s supporters say forests need human help to quickly adapt to a 21st century climate. That means more planting as well as more cutting.

“The rate of change [in forests] is not linear,” Daley said. “We are living through an era of explosive change, and it would be really misguided for us not to adapt with the speed that our climate is changing and our forests are changing,” Daley said.

For instance, he said, some forests could benefit from hardier tree species replacing ones that have become poorly suited for hotter, drier conditions. Proper forest management can facilitate that process.

“When we get those forests to a place where they’re actually in a healthy, resilient state in the future, they’re going to look in some places really different from what our eyes and our culture have become accustomed to,” he added.

The infrastructure bill attempts to address some environmentalists' criticisms. The funding for cutting trees, it says, must be used "in an ecologically appropriate manner that maximizes the retention of large trees ... to the extent that the trees promote fire-resilient stands."

But it takes more than just keeping the big trees to get fire resilience, said Jessica McCarty, a Miami University professor who studies wildfire. Operating the logging machinery can be a fire risk, and moving such equipment through the forest leaves lasting disturbances.

"If you take out everything but the large trees, you've probably disturbed and/or compacted the soil. Then what's going to grow in the understory? Probably grasses and forbs. And to be quite frank, in North America, that means you have a high likelihood of invasive species," she said.

It would be a good thing for federal agencies to shift their timber programs toward sustainable, climate adaptive practices, McCarty added. That would mean an end to clear-cutting and better incentives for more selective logging in natural areas.

"There is no world where we don't use trees," she said. "I prefer trees over plastic any day."

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