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Feinstein forest bill may spur accord

But the bipartisan plan doesn't protect old-growth trees enough, critics say.

By David Whitney -- Bee Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON -- California Sen. Dianne Feinstein on Wednesday unveiled a bipartisan agreement aimed at unlocking legislation to reduce the threat of catastrophic forest fires.

The Democratic senator said the agreement would speed up forest thinning while creating first-ever legal protections for the oldest and largest trees that typically survive fire in naturally occurring underbrush.

"With 57 million acres of federal land at the highest risk of catastrophic fire, including 8.5 million acres in California, it is critical that we protect our forests and nearby communities," Feinstein said.

But environmentalists said the deal wouldn't protect populated areas any better than President Bush's "Healthy Forests" legislation or the House-passed version that they called a giveaway to the timber industry. They also said the old-growth protections, while welcome, probably are insufficient to stop logging in the guise of forest protection.

In the House, the Feinstein-orchestrated compromise generated little enthusiasm. Brian Kennedy, spokesman for the House Resources Committee, said its chairman, Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, regards it as "throwing additional bureaucratic hurdles in front of catastrophic fire prevention."

But Kennedy hailed the arrival of the compromise because of its potential for spurring passage of legislation in the Senate. The House passed its bill in May on a 256-170 vote.

Kennedy said the House leadership is "very eager" to see the Senate approve a bill so the two chambers can craft a final deal before Congress recesses this year.

Despite another hot, dry summer in which hundreds of thousands of acres of timberlands were destroyed by enormous fires in the West, the Senate is straddling deep divisions over how to ease the threat.

There probably are enough votes in the Senate to approve a bill along the lines of the White House initiative if it could get past a filibuster. It takes 60 votes to stop a filibuster, and those votes won't be there if Democrats stand united.

The deal outlined by Feinstein was crafted by six Republicans and four Democrats, including Sens. Ron Wyden of Oregon and Max Baucus of Montana, whose states have been especially hard hit by wildfire.

While it reflects the Bush administration's desire to relax environmental laws to clear federal forests of unnaturally heavy underbrush, the deal also tries to restrain the U.S. Forest Service from entering old-growth areas and cutting big trees in the name of forest-fire prevention.

The compromise also moves closer to the environmentalists' desire to see the forest-thinning effort focused on protecting homes. It directs that half of the \$760 million to be spent annually on fuel reduction go into clearing around communities.

Feinstein warned that the deal is precarious, suggesting it will require a White House endorsement if there is any hope of a forest bill this year.

While well-intentioned, environmentalists said, the compromise isn't much of an advancement.

"Senator Feinstein has worked hard to get old-growth protected management," said Jay Watson, former California director for the Wilderness Society and now heading its wildlands fire program. "But there are some real loopholes that are open to abuse."

Chief among them, Watson said, is that the bill would allow cutting of old-growth trees where there has been wind or insect damage. But Watson said wind and insect damage is common in old-growth forests and easily could become an excuse for logging the best, most valuable trees under expedited procedures.

About the Writer

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