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Bush official rallies support for logging legislation at Sonora summit

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(08-23) 00:03 PDT SONORA, Calif. (AP) --

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President Bush's agriculture undersecretary came to California timber country Friday to rally support for legislation that would ease logging restrictions in the name of fire protection and forest health.

Mark Rey, who is in charge of national forests, spoke to a pro-logging audience of about 150 people, many suffering from a decade of decline in government timber sales, at a national resources summit in Tuolumne County, the Modesto Bee reported.

"We've made as many administrative changes as we can," Rey said of Bush's Healthy Forest Initiative, a year-old effort to cut red tape that hinders logging on dangerously overstocked, dry and weakened public lands.

The next step, Rey said, is legislation that puts thinning and fire salvage operations on a faster track than regular timber sales. The House has passed a bill that would ease environmental requirements and make "healthy forest" projects harder to delay through appeals and lawsuits.

Rey said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-California, will be a key player in passing a Senate version, and that she and the administration are negotiating on a compromise but are "not quite in agreement."

About 10 major healthy forest logging projects have been bogged down in lawsuits, he said. Judges almost routinely grant injunctions against logging projects during lawsuits, he said, on the theory that you cannot uncut a tree.

HR 1904 would require judges to "give deference" to any agency that finds inaction would risk harm to the ecosystem.

Many environmentalists believe that provision puts too much trust in the Forest Service to cut whatever and wherever it wants.

A group of 11 Environment California members, one of them dressed up as a tree trunk, demonstrated outside with signs like "Save Our Wild Forests" and "Biggest Threat to Our Forests: Bush Admin."

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