



Deal to reform wildfire budget, hasten logging gains momentum

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A pending deal to reform the nation's wildfire spending and expedite logging on national forests is picking up momentum as a potential tag-along to the 2016 omnibus spending package, according to multiple sources close to Capitol Hill.

But a key unknown is whether negotiators can gain support from Budget Chairman Tom Price (R-Ga.) and House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), who have both historically opposed the wildfire budget reforms that are a key component of the emerging deal.

Sources said both Republicans appear to have softened their opposition to allowing some wildfires to be fought using disaster funds, a move aimed at providing budget stability to the Forest Service and Interior Department that would possibly free up more funding for logging, restoration and recreation projects.

And a top Agriculture Department official said he could support a deal that would include limited National Environmental Policy Act reforms to expedite logging -- a key demand of Republicans and a significant number of Western Democrats.

One lobbyist close to the negotiations said a deal appeared to be within grasp and that progress has been made mitigating concerns from fiscally conservative House leaders.

But the window of opportunity for a deal is closing fast as negotiators seek to put the final touches on a long-term omnibus bill ([*see related story*](#)). When, and if, House and Senate leaders can agree on higher-profile spending bill policy issues like refugees and gun violence, the wildfire-forestry deal would need to be ready to hitch a ride.

Price's spokesman yesterday declined to comment on his boss's position on the talks.

House Natural Resources Chairman Rob Bishop (R-Utah), a key negotiator on this deal, said he would "seriously doubt" that Price is a stumbling block to reforming wildfire budgeting.

"The biggest stumbling block actually is on the other side of this building," Bishop said. "If you're going to have the wildfire funding without management reforms, it's a waste of money."

Bishop said he sees Senate Democrats as the biggest impediment to streamlining forest management, a key element of the deal. "I think that's apparently a lift that's dogmatically too far for them to deal with," he said.

What emerges in the deal is anyone's guess. The package continues to evolve, according to sources.

But if a deal is struck it would likely contain elements of the "**Wildfire Disaster Funding Act**" (WDFFA) as well as provisions similar to what's been proposed in **H.R. 2647** by Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.), which would allow larger and more intensive logging projects to be approved using categorical exclusions (CE).

Sources said CE's could be offered for roadside timber salvage and projects that create "early successional" forest habitat, which requires something akin to a clearcut. Provisions that could woo Democrats include raising the funding ceiling for the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program and promoting watershed assessments.

The Obama administration will likely require any deal to include WDFFA or a modified version of it. The bill would both spare the Forest Service the disruptive practice of "fire borrowing" and prevent wildfire expenditures from continuing to erode the agency's forest stewardship work.

The administration will concede some policy reforms.

"There's an opportunity here to get something that is bipartisan -- that solves the fire fix and provides some forest reform," Robert Bonnie, Agriculture undersecretary for natural resources and environment, told *E&E Daily* last week at a Western Governors' Association meeting in Las Vegas.

Bonnie said the administration will support NEPA streamlining if it ensures projects are planned through collaboration, that they protect old-growth trees and prevent new roads. It's pushing for the same types of environmental safeguards that were included in the 2014 farm bill, which allowed projects of up to 3,000 acres to be approved through categorical exclusions.

"We're committed to good NEPA processes, open and transparent processes," he said. "We want the environmental community at the table. We want industry at the table. That's the model that works."

Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), the sponsor of WDFFA, is a leading proponent for a deal in the Senate. A Wyden aide said he has been "closely involved in the negotiations to solve the fire borrowing problem" but would not comment on his position on forestry policy.

Some conservation groups are likely to support the deal, or at least not oppose it.

Roughly three dozen sportsmen's organization Wednesday sent a **letter** to House and Senate leaders asking that they support a package in the omnibus that would reform wildfire funding and hasten forest projects.

"We support efforts in both chambers of Congress to provide additional authorities to the Forest Service and the BLM to expedite forest management projects that would return federal public lands to a more diverse set of habitat types, which compose more productive landscapes," said the letter, whose signatories included the National Wildlife Federation and Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership.

"We are also united in our support of efforts to address and reform chronic wildfire suppression funding problems that diminish federal land management agencies' ability to properly manage habitat and outdoor recreation on public land," the letter says.

Yet other conservation groups want WDFA to move on its own, noting that it has strong bipartisan support. Logging critics argue that the farm bill's NEPA streamlining provisions need to be given more time to work.

"We were hoping [WDFA] could move by itself," said Athan Manuel, a lobbyist on public lands for the Sierra Club. "We really don't want that good idea linked to bad forest policies."

An email to Defenders of Wildlife was unreturned. The group issued a memo Monday saying it opposes the numerous spending bill riders that have been advanced in Congress, but it did not mention the potential wildfire-logging deal.

The House's tea party wing is a major wildcard in this deal, given the belief by some that it will increase government spending.

A blog **post** yesterday by the libertarian Cato Institute titled "Dumping money on fire" called WDFA a "blank check for firefighting," which is not something you want to hear if you're a fiscal conservative. Proponents of WDFA note that the bill did not register a score with the Congressional Budget Office, though critics say it would clear the way for additional government spending.

"This marriage of convenience between anti-environmental interests -- and I count a lot of Western Democrats in that camp -- combined with USDA and its bureaucracy that wants to see more money and logging, I think they might both find themselves tripped up by tea party folks who think this is a total boondoggle waste of dollars," said Andy Stahl, executive director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics.