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ACT TO SAVE AMERICA'S FORESTS

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Lost in the political excitement of the Presidential election cycle was the recent introduction of the largest and strongest nationwide forest protection bill in U.S. history, the Act to Save America's Forests 2008.

The Act, sponsored by Representative Anna Eshoo (D-CA) and backed by the grassroots coalition, Save America's Forests, is the latest attempt to change the US Forest Service from its former role as a handmaiden to the timber industry to a new role as caretakers of America's public natural forest ecosystems. Among other things, the Act would prohibit clearcutting, preserve Ancient Forests and roadless lands, while mandating the agency protect and restore biodiversity.

The Act would also transfer the Giant Sequoia National Monument from the Forest Service, which persists in logging in the sequoia groves despite its

national monument status, to the Park Service which has a better track record on preserving the sequoias in the neighboring Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park.

The Act also gained an innovative new section this year which requires the National Park Service to conduct a comprehensive study of all U.S. ecosystems to determine where holes exist in our ecological protection of natural landscapes, and to propose creation of new national parks in all these areas to correct this deficiency.

The Act was first introduced into Congress in 1996 and has been reintroduced in each successive Congress since then, most recently this past September. With the new makeup of Congress and a new President in the Whitehouse, backers of this legislation feel the time is perhaps right to enact this sweeping legislation.

Besides protecting over 60 million acres of "core areas" – riparian areas, Ancient Forests and Roadless areas, the bill specifically bans logging and road-building in over a hundred other specially designated "special areas" mostly in Eastern and Mid-Western national forests. These include areas with high biological value such as wildlife migration corridors, key habitat for rare species, rare habitats, and areas with high levels of biodiversity, among others. Other special areas include forests with high recreational, geologic, cultural, and/or scenic value. Even such things like opportunities for solitude that previously were not among the values given protection from logging impacts would be given consideration.

However, the Act itself does not completely ban logging on all areas of the national forests. Small amounts of selection logging would be permitted on previously logged lands, outside of the core protected areas. However, such logging would occur only if tree cutting were furthering strictly defined ecological restoration efforts, for instance, removal of non-native invasive trees. The Forest Service would be required to restore the millions of acres of monoculture tree farms sprawling across our national forest lands to naturally biodiverse old-growth forests.

This legislation is unprecedented in scale – covering over 200 million acres of federal lands – and unprecedented also in its requirements for full ecological protection and restoration of all native species of flora and fauna. This has led some observers to conclude that the bill is too “environmental” to gain serious traction in Congress. Yet the Act has been supported by some of the most powerful politicians in Congress, and gained over 140 House and Senate cosponsors in a recent Congress, demonstrating that its passage is indeed legislatively feasible. Some more notable current or former cosponsors include Nancy Pelosi, now speaker of the House, Rahm Emanuel, the next White House Chief of Staff, former Presidential nominee John Kerry, and Environment Committee Chair Barbara Boxer.

Based on the principles of Conservation Biology, the Act has received the support of over 600 world renowned scientists including E.O. Wilson, Peter Raven, Stuart Pimm, and Jane Goodall. It is worth reiterating some of the points these scientists made in a letter of support to Congress. They wrote: “Clearcutting and other even aged silvicultural practices and timber road construction have caused widespread forest ecosystem fragmentation and degradation. The result is species extinction, soil erosion, flooding, destabilizing climate change, the loss of ecological processes, declining water quality, [and] diminishing commercial and sport fisheries...”

And they go on to note that: “Less than 5% of America's original primary forests remain, and these forests are found primarily on federal lands.”

The bill is expected to be reintroduced in both the House and the Senate in the next session of Congress and have committee hearings. The Act to Save America’s Forests will go a long ways towards correcting a century of abuses and degradation of our public forest ecosystems and put them on a pathway towards ecological recovery and restoration. It deserves the support of all.

http://wuerthner.blogspot.com/2008_11_01_archive.html