A Look at the 'Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015'

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News is piling up that a particularly hard summer of wildfire is on the way. These dramatic and dangerous events are all consuming in several meanings of the phrase. From the conservation perspective, an unnaturally large wildfire that consumes a forest is also consuming wildlife habitat (and the homes of people) and the cost of fighting fire consumes budgets intended for productive conservation work.

But perhaps the most dangerous loss is that fires consume our attention. Fixation on the fires themselves – dreading them beforehand, bemoaning them afterwards – turns our attention from the reasons these disasters have become routine, and the work we can begin today to put fire in its proper ecological place. This is why now – before the worst fires begin – is a good time to look at Congressman Bruce Westerman's (R-AR) "Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015."

This act could just as well be named the Returning Habitat Diversity Act or the Returning Habitat Productivity Act as these are the important results we can achieve for big game and other wildlife, and for recreation through this bill. The fires themselves are only one part of the problem as overgrown forests are poor wildlife habitat even before they burn. Making this worse, as large areas of forest all crowd into the same condition, wildlife habitat loses diversity, especially young, open-canopy forests. As forests succumb to severe wildfires, more lands become uncharacteristically scorched, and we lose more of those fire-adapted habitats that flourish with smaller regular ground-fires.

The bill was reviewed by the House Natural Resources committee on June 3 and will be voted on June 11. It addresses flat funding, litigation and over-complicated regulations, which are the main causes of why many National Forests have now long been inadequately cared for. The consequences have been worsening dramatically in the last 30 years. It is not just that bigger, hotter and longer fires are now burning; it is that the Forest Service has been unable to do much about it. A 2012 Obama Administration report on increasing the Pace and Scale of Management on the National Forests is the latest of many reports showing the poor health of a large portion of federal forests.

Given the realities that tens of thousands of acres must be managed each year, and that funding for business as usual is – at best – flat, the inescapable answer is to update the expensive process of conducting habitat management so we can accomplish more faster and for half the cost.

This is why the "Resilient Federal Forests Act" focuses on a variety of fixes for such a dramatic problem as a wildfire.

It would enable the Forest Service carry out multiple projects of the same kind based on a single environmental analysis instead of having to repeat that analysis each time. This will help because environmental analyses are time consuming, so repeating them when we already know the answers is a waste of time. And the environmental documents are also a favorite target of anti-forestry advocates who know that even failed lawsuits against the Forest Service at least slow the agency down.

Under Resilient Federal Forests, the Forest Service would be able to rely more heavily on collaboration in developing projects with less legal controversy. This gets the incentives right. People who differ on what a public forest should look like should be able to state their cases, deliberate with others and then abide by the ultimate decision.

By restoring active forest management, the bill would restart the forest management economy, supplying funds for rural schools and begin a revolving fund that uses proceeds from management projects to fund more such projects to build a faster pace of restoration.

These are many of the best ideas for forest management considered by Congress over the last several years. The Club supports these ideas for improvement over excuses for the status quo.