

Open Letter to Members of Congress from 250 Scientists

Concerned about Post-fire Logging

October 30, 2013

As professional scientists with backgrounds in ecological sciences and natural resources management, we are greatly concerned that post-disturbance legislation addressed in HR 1526, which passed the House in September 2013, would suspend federal environmental protections to expedite and increase logging of post-fire habitat and mandate increased commercial logging of unburned forests on national forests. In addition, HR 3188, as currently proposed in the House, would override federal environmental laws to mandate post-fire clearcutting operations in national forests, Yosemite National Park, and designated Wilderness areas within the 257,000-acre Rim fire on the Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite National Park. Both bills ignore the current state of scientific knowledge, which indicates that such activity would seriously undermine the ecological integrity of forest ecosystems on federal lands.

Though it may seem at first glance that a post-fire landscape is a catastrophe ecologically, numerous scientific studies tell us that even in patches where forest fires burned most intensely the resulting post-fire community is one of the most ecologically important and biodiverse habitat types in western conifer forests. Post-fire conditions serve as a refuge for rare and imperiled wildlife that depend upon the unique habitat features created by intense fire. These include an abundance of standing dead trees or “snags” that provide nesting and foraging habitat for woodpeckers and many other wildlife species, as well as patches of native flowering shrubs that replenish soil nitrogen and attract a diverse bounty of beneficial insects that aid in pollination after fire. Small mammals find excellent habitat in the shrubs and downed logs, deer and elk browse on post-fire shrubs and natural conifer regeneration, bears eat the berries often found in substantial quantities after intense fire, and morel mushrooms, prized by many Americans, spring from the ashes in the most severely burned forest patches.

This post-fire habitat, known as “complex early seral forest,” is quite simply some of the best wildlife habitat in forests and is an essential stage of natural forest processes. Moreover, it is the least protected of all forest habitat types and is often as rare, or rarer, than old-growth forest, due to damaging forest practices encouraged by post-fire logging policies. While there remains much to be discovered about fire in our forests, the scientific evidence indicates that complex early seral forest is a natural part of historical fire regimes in nearly every conifer forest type in the western U.S. (including ponderosa pine and mixed-conifer forests) and that small and large patches of it occur. Much of the current scientific information on the ecological importance of post-fire habitat can be found in several excellent videos¹.

¹ <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r5/news-events/audiovisual/?cid=stelprdb5431394>;
<https://vimeo.com/75533376>; <http://vimeo.com/groups/future/videos/8627070>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTl-naywNyY&list=PL7F70F134E853F520&index=15>;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BmTq8vGAVo&feature=youtu.be>; <http://vimeo.com/3428311>

Numerous studies also document the cumulative impacts of post-fire logging on natural ecosystems, including the elimination of bird species that are most dependent on such conditions, compaction of soils, elimination of biological legacies (snags and downed logs) that are essential in supporting new forest growth, spread of invasive species, accumulation of logging slash that can add to future fire risks, increased mortality of conifer seedlings and other important re-establishing vegetation (from logs dragged uphill in logging operations), and increased chronic sedimentation in streams due to the extensive road network and runoff from logging operations².

We urge you to consider what the science is telling us: that post-fire habitats created by fire, including patches of severe fire, are ecological treasures rather than ecological catastrophes, and that post-fire logging does far more harm than good to the nation's public lands.

Sincerely,

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² Hutto, R. L. 2006. Toward meaningful snag-management guidelines for postfire salvage logging in North American conifer forests. *Conservation Biology* 20:984-993. Beschta, R.L. et al. 2004. Postfire management on forested public lands of the western USA. *Conservation Biology* 18:957-967. Lindenmayer, D.B. et al. 2004. Salvage harvesting policies after natural disturbance. *Science* 303:1303. Karr, J. et al. 2004. The effects of postfire salvage logging on aquatic ecosystems in the American West. *Bioscience* 54:1029-1033. DellaSala, D.A., et al. 2006. Post-fire logging debate ignores many issues. *Science* 314:51-52. Donato, D.C. et al. 2006. Post-wildfire logging hinders regeneration and increases fire risk. *Science* 311 No. 5759:352.

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