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Protect citizens' rights to petition the government

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The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guards against legislative and executive abuses, prohibiting Congress from making laws that restrict a citizen's right to petition the government to redress grievances. The legal system continues to be a critically important part of our democracy.

A full-page advertisement by Project Protect in The Oregonian on Sept. 21 attacked "radical" environmental groups and their "radical" attorneys for using the courts to voice concerns over harmful logging projects. Highlighting a lawsuit filed by environmental groups challenging post-fire salvage logging in Eastern Oregon, the ad seems to suggest -- as Oregon Sen. Gordon Smith has recently proposed for the Biscuit salvage -- that citizen access to the courts be eliminated.

Does Project Protect know what is best for our forests or our democracy?

Records from the Oregon secretary of state's office reveal that Tom Partin is both the president of the American Forest Resources Council, a timber industry trade association, and the president of Project Protect. Through both organizations, Partin contends that conservationists are killing the forest through legal stalling. Project Protect is not interested in protecting the wildlife or the forest it depends on. Rather, it is working hard to ensure that the timber industry recoups the millions in campaign contributions given to President Bush's re-election campaign by logging old-growth forests on our public lands.

What the ad does not discuss is that extracting burned trees immediately following a wildfire jeopardizes the ability of the forest to rejuvenate naturally and endangers fish habitat through drastic increases in sediment delivery to streams. Numerous studies by well-respected scientists have found that salvage logging has serious long-term negative ecological impacts. Studies have also determined that there is no scientific support for the hypothesis that salvage logging reduces the possibility of future fires.

Citizens continue to ask land managers to actively restore burned landscapes rather than simply logging them for profit. Burned forests are not wastelands. Instead, fire is part of the necessary process of forest regeneration, which salvage logging violently interrupts.

From our vantage point, the Bush administration seems fixated on contentious salvage logging proposals rather than on genuine efforts to protect homes and communities by thinning small-diameter trees and brush to reduce fire risk. There is great support for genuine fuel reduction, but Project Protect chooses instead to fan the flames of controversy.

As public-interest attorneys, we firmly believe in the integral role that federal courts and our environmental laws play in our democracy. The laws require the government to tell the truth about a project's environmental effects and to

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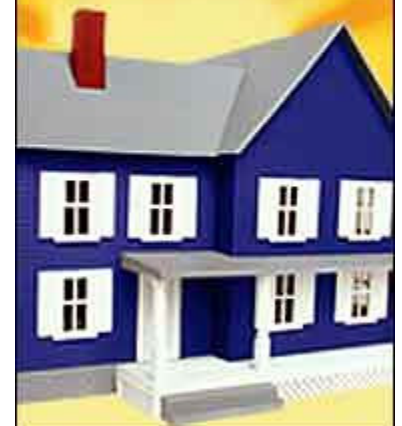
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conserve fish, wildlife and soils. Our clients work to ensure that the government fulfills these obligations.

As a last resort, the legal system is there to arbitrate these disputes and hold federal agencies accountable for ill-conceived projects. The time has come to move away from the controversy and focus on protecting homes and communities. If we heed the call to remove citizen access to the courts, we remove the requirement that the government tell the public the truth and conserve our forest resources for future generations.

Ralph Bloemers is an attorney with Cascade Resources Advocacy Group, a non-profit law firm that focuses on environmental issues. Susan Jane Brown is an attorney with the Pacific Environmental Advocacy Center, a non-profit law firm and legal clinic that represents conservation organizations.

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