

Salvage Logging a Key Issue in Oregon

Bush Plan to Aid Forests After Wildfires Draws Criticism

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SISKIYOU NATIONAL FOREST, Ore. -- The massive Biscuit fire that scorched this forest two summers ago has become a wedge issue in the presidential race in Oregon, a swing state where the contest remains too close to call.

President Bush used the Biscuit fire in 2002 as a smoldering launchpad for his Healthy Forests Initiative, a plan to fight future fires by logging burned trees, many of them in previously protected stands of old-growth timber. On an evening campaign stop in southern Oregon on Thursday, Bush criticized his Democratic opponent, Sen. John F. Kerry (Mass.), for voting to oppose the initiative.

"My opponent says he's in touch with the West, but sometimes I think he means western Massachusetts," Bush said, according the Associated Press.

The president's plan to cut trees -- and create jobs -- resonates widely in this heavily forested state, where the unemployment rate of 7.4 percent is the country's second highest and where recent polls show a statistical dead heat in the presidential race.

Campaign commercials in southern Oregon by Rep. Greg Walden (R), sponsor of the Bush forest plan in the House, focus on the urgent economic and environmental need for post-fire salvage logging. A series of full-page timber industry ads in the Oregonian, the Northwest's largest paper, have warned that without the president's plan to remove burned timber and replant trees "our grandchildren may find nothing but ashes" in the half-million acres of forest damaged by the Biscuit fire. Local timber companies are large donors to the Bush campaign, according to a recent study by the watchdog group Common Cause.

Kerry opposes the logging plan, calling it a "betrayal of the public trust" that gives timber companies access to fragile public lands. Environmental lawsuits have halted most of the planned logging.

Meanwhile, Sen. Gordon Smith (R-Ore.), who last month described half of this forest as a "charred moonscape," has threatened to introduce legislation that would end current and future legal challenges to salvage logging.

Amid the political posturing and legal infighting, the underlying reality of the forest appears to be changing -- biologically and economically.

The "charred moonscape" that Smith has said cannot recover without reforestation is showing what environmentalists say are clear signs of recovery, with infant pine trees sprouting in the shade of torched timber and wetland plants thriving in a landscape stripped of competition for moisture. Forest Service surveys after the fire have found that about half the vegetation in the fire zone had little or no damage.

At the same time, the economics of salvage logging have taken a sharp turn toward the unprofitable. Since July, the Forest Service has failed to attract bids on three proposed sales of fire-damaged but marketable trees. Earlier, nine sales found buyers, although lawsuits have stopped logging on all but two sales, the Forest Service said.

"Timber companies are not going to cut timber if they don't think they can make any money on it," said Dave Schott, executive vice president of the Southern Oregon Timber Industries Association.

Because much of the timber is in inaccessible areas, Schott said, it has to be logged with helicopters, which sharply increases costs. He said that two years of rot and pest infestation have reduced salvageable timber to one size and kind

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of tree -- large Douglas fir, which is suitable for processing into plywood.

But Schott said plywood prices have plummeted in recent weeks, and the debate about salvage logging is quickly approaching the point of irrelevance. "It is really hard for these mills to buy a pig in a poke right now," he said.

The third wild card in the dispute over logging in the Biscuit fire zone is the scientific question of whether it is good for the forest and helps prevent future wildfires.

"We must be active in our management of our forests," Bush said here two years ago. "We must thin, and we must quickly restore the areas that have been damaged by fire."

Bush said then that there is agreement among forestry experts on the need for salvage logging after major forest fires. Several professors of forest management at Oregon State University have written a paper supporting the president's viewpoint.

But seven of the world's leading forest ecologists say that salvage logging is the wrong prescription for fire-damaged forests such as the Siskiyou. Writing this year in the journal *Science*, they said research findings from around the world show that "salvage logging can impair ecosystem recovery." They also wrote that fire has long-term benefits that increase biological diversity -- and that salvage logging "undermines" these benefits.

Jerry F. Franklin, professor of ecosystem science at the University of Washington and a co-author of the *Science* article, said forests are more resistant to wildfire if they are not logged and replanted.

The Bush plan, he said in an interview, "has nothing to do with forest recovery."

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