

Scientists oppose logging bills in Congress

By Scott Sonner, AP

More than 200 biologists, ecologists and other scientists are urging Congress to defeat legislation they say would destroy critical wildlife habitat by setting aside U.S. environmental laws to speed logging of burned trees at Yosemite National Park and other national forests and wilderness areas across the West.

The experts say two measures pushed by pro-logging interests ignore a growing scientific consensus that the burned landscape plays a critical role in forest regeneration and is home to many birds, bats and other species found nowhere else.

"We urge you to consider what the science is telling us: that post-fire habitat 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," they wrote in a letter mailed to members of Congress Friday.

One bill, authored by Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Wash., would make logging a requirement on some public forestland, speed timber sales and discourage legal challenges.

The House approved the legislation 244-173 in September and sent it to the Senate, where it awaits consideration by the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. The White House has threatened a veto, saying it would jeopardize endangered species, increase lawsuits and block creation of national monuments.

Hastings, chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, said wildfires burned 9.3 million acres in the U.S. last year,

while the Forest Service only harvested timber from about 200,000 acres.

Hastings' bill includes an amendment by Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Granite Bay, which he also introduced as separate legislation specific to lands burned by this year's Rim Fire at Yosemite National Park, neighboring wilderness and national forests in the Sierra Nevada.

"We have no time to waste in the aftermath of the Yosemite Rim Fire," McClintock said at a subcommittee hearing in October. "By the time the formal environmental review of salvage operations has been completed in a year, what was once forestland will have already begun converting to brushland, and by the following year, reforestation will become infinitely more difficult and expensive."

The Rim Fire started in August and grew to become one of the largest wildfires in California history. It burned 400 square miles and destroyed 11 residences, three commercial properties and 98 outbuildings. It cost \$127 million to fight.

Members of the House Natural Resources Committee remain optimistic the Senate will take up Hastings' bill before the end of the year, said Mallory Micetich, the committee's deputy press secretary.

"We have a lot of hazardous fuel buildup, and it will help alleviate some of the threat of catastrophic wildfires," she said.

The scientists see it differently.

"Just about the worst thing you can do to these forests after a fire is salvage-log them," said Dominick DellaSala, the lead author of the letter. "It's worse than the fire itself because it sets back the recovery that begins the minute the fire is out."

DellaSala, chief scientist at the conservation group Geos Institute in Ashland, Ore., was on a team of scientists that produced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's final recovery plan for the spotted owl in 2008.

Many who signed the opposition letter have done research in the field and several played roles with the U.S. Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife Service in developing logging policies for the threatened northern spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest.

"Though it may seem at first glance that a post-fire landscape is a catastrophe ecologically," they wrote, "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.

"Moreover, it is the least protected of all forest types and is often as rare, or rarer, than old-growth forest due to damaging forest practices encouraged by post-fire logging policies."