H.R. 2647 — "Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015"

BILL SUMMARY

The Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015, H.R. 2647, is a comprehensive bill aimed at expediting and improving forest management activities in federal forests. It builds upon many legislative concepts introduced in this and previous Congresses to address disastrous consequences of catastrophic wildfire, insect and disease infestations, and other threats to our nation's forests. This bill seeks to return resilience to overgrown, fire-prone forested lands.

In testimony before the House Natural Resources Committee's Federal Lands Subcommittee, US Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell said the Administration supports portions of a discussion draft very similar to the bill and the intent of the bill. The agency's hearing summary states, "Chief Tidwell opened with his appreciation for the intent of the draft bill to build on success, encourage collaboration, reduce process, add capacity and avoid changes that would polarize forest interests."

Specifically, the bill:

• Empowers the Forest Service to immediately implement tools to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire, insect and disease infestation, and damage to municipal watersheds.

• Builds upon the successes of categorical exclusions. CEs are used for routine activities with known outcomes, and they save the Forest Service time and money while still protecting the environment and natural resources.

• Expedites the Forest Service's ability to quickly remove dead trees after wildfires. This will pay for reforestation and rehabilitation, including planting trees, surveying for natural regeneration, clearing vegetation around seedlings, and other activities.

• Incentivizes collaboration among groups, ensuring each facet of the forest industry (environmental groups, timber companies, local stakeholders, wildlife groups, etc.) has a seat at the table, and speeds the implementation of collaborative projects.

• Protects collaborative projects from unnecessary delay by requiring bonding for legal challenges. This discourages arbitrary and frivolous litigation against the Forest Service that wastes their time and costs taxpayers money.

• Ensures robust protection of the environment through environmental reviews, while making environmental process requirements more efficient by reducing project planning times and costs of implementing forest management projects.

• Maintains that all new projects comply with Forest Plans. This does not authorize expansive clear cutting across our nation's forests.

• Creates no new federal red-tape or requirements—no new mapping, planning, rule-making or reports.

• Updates and modernizes the Secure Rural Schools law and reauthorizes the Resource Advisory Committees (RACs) that have brought diverse view points together to solve national forest management problems. This bill allows local areas to tailor RACs to fit their unique needs.

• Provides new methods of funding projects such as 'revolving funds' for projects on national forests funded by states. For example, Montana, New Mexico, and Oregon each have made efforts to fund national forest projects to prevent catastrophic wildfire. This legislation gives them the ability to do this.

• Requires that any court hearing a case regarding Forest Service action must weigh the benefits of taking short-term action versus the potential long-term harm of inaction (fire, etc.).

• Amends the Stewardship Contracting Authority so the Forest Service is no longer required to set aside money in the event a stewardship contract is cancelled. The Forest Service is currently required to cover potential losses in capital expenditures by a contractor in rare cases (such as if there is a significantly extended government shutdown and the contractor cannot operate as a result). This would allow the Forest Service to utilize funds which were deposited in these accounts for additional project work.

COST

Due to the streamlined authorities in this bill, there should be an increase in acres treated, and thus, the Committee does not expect the bill to score.