

Hardwood Federation Update Trade Alerts & More

*By Dana Lee Cole
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First off, an important note regarding the China Tariff situation! As I'm sure you know, the situation is an evolving one. Such an elusive resolve is frustrating to all involved. That, however, is politics in Washington, I'm afraid.

Please know that the Hardwood Federation team will continue to carefully monitor the situation and provide information - as we receive it - and analysis and insight, as we can. I welcome your comments, as always. And I'll remind you that our Trade Alert Informational Updates are being posted to www.HMAmembers.org. (Thank you HMA!)

Forest Funding Still on the Table

Friend and forester Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-AR) recently reintroduced his Resilient Federal Forests Act - his comprehensive forest management reform bill that has passed the House the last couple of Congresses, but has yet to be taken up by the full Senate. The legislation relies heavily on establishing new "categorical exclusions" (CEs) from comprehensive environmental impact assessments required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to expedite needed forest management work on federal lands.

- Westerman has been advocating equipping the Forest Service with more CEs as a common sense approach to allow forest management projects that are similar in scope to other projects that have already undergone environmental assessments to move forward quickly.
- A key provision in the bill would authorize a new CE for improving and restoring National Forest System lands or to reduce the risk of wildfire. Among the many activities authorized by this provision is forest thinning and hazardous fuels management. The acreage limitation for this CE is capped at 10,000 acres.
- Also, the bill authorizes a pilot program for using arbitration, instead of litigation, to address challenges to forest management activities.

Over the last few years, Hardwood Federation has strongly supported this legislation as an effective approach to not only reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, but also thin our overstocked and undermanaged forests that are threatened with insect infestation and disease.

However ...

In the new Congress this year, the political dynamic has changed, and so have the prospects for the Resilient Federal Forests Act. Democrat leadership on the House Natural Resources Committee is not embracing forest management as an effective wildfire prevention tool, arguing instead that thinning trees (particularly larger trees) accelerates the spread of wildfire as wind driven fires more easily penetrate the forest stand.

Westerman's legislation is not likely to move in the House this Congress; however some of its provisions may be folded into Senate legislation that may materialize later this year. In a recent meeting with Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee staff, we learned that Senators Daines and Feinstein are working on legislation that would promote more forest management projects on federal lands, and incentivize deployment of biomass facilities to help process additional forest material flowing off these lands.

Also, incremental progress on forest management policy may be enacted through the appropriations process. In the Fiscal Year 2020 Interior appropriations bill, there is language directing additional funding for hazardous fuels management, as well as incentives for increasing use of biomass off of federal forest lands.

The HF team will be working with our House and Senate champions to help inform the public policy debate around the need for more forest management, continuing the progress we've made on this issue over the last few years.

Lastly ...

Another forest health issue receiving high level attention is invasive species. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) recently visited a Cooperstown, NY baseball bat manufacturer located across the street from the Baseball Hall of Fame. Schumer got an earful about the Emerald Ash Borer's threat to ash trees, and the potential impacts on the New York economy, and our nation's pastime.

Since his visit, Schumer has advocated for increasing FY 2020 funding for accounts within the U.S. Department of Agriculture to combat the spread of this insect and other invasives. And while HF has not seen Schumer's specific appropriations request, it is reported that he's asked for a considerable increase in funding for this account.

As always, HF will continue to monitor these issues. Contact me with questions, please.