

Cleaves and Simon: Forest-waste program worth saving

Robert Cleaves and Daniel Simon - Jun. 20, 2011 12:00 AM

As the largest wildfire in Arizona history rages on, lawmakers in Washington, D.C., are poised to vote on a bill that would kill a program with the potential to tamp down forest-fire risk and save millions of dollars.

The Wallow Fire is just one example of how overcrowded forests increase catastrophic-wildfire risks. As the Arizona forester told a state legislative committee in March, many Arizona forests have "too many trees."

The U.S. Forest Service has stepped up efforts to reduce fire risks through forest thinning and underbrush removal. In fact, U.S. Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., told a Senate committee on Tuesday that the Wallow Fire has been less severe in areas that had been thinned, a practice that, when done properly, is supported by many forestry experts and environmental groups. It also is much cheaper to manage by thinning than to fight wildfires.

Unfortunately, two days after Sen. Kyl urged the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee to act to restore forest health, the full U.S. House voted to defund the Biomass Crop Assistance Program. The Senate has yet to take up the measure.

BCAP, launched in 2009, aims to encourage the use of otherwise-wasted biomass materials (including forest waste and residue) for energy by providing matching payments to help subsidize the costs incurred in collecting and transporting these materials to bioenergy facilities.

Forest waste and residue can be used to generate electricity (as the Snowflake White Mountain Power biomass plant does) or converted into biofuels, such as cellulosic ethanol. An established bioenergy industry could save the federal government millions of dollars on forest thinning. Not to mention that pollution controls at facilities such as Snowflake capture ash and many harmful emissions otherwise released in a wildfire.

Unfortunately, the demand for forest waste and residue is currently insufficient to recover the costs of collecting these materials. That's where BCAP comes in. The matching payments are designed to encourage investment in long-term

efforts. Eventually, forest residue and waste should become valuable enough for the energy sector to harvest it - without the subsidy carrot.

Out of the gate, BCAP understandably received criticism. The U.S. Department of Agriculture launched it quickly in 2009 to assist renewable energy during the recession, yielding a program the USDA inspector general found to have "wide-ranging problems." The USDA, however, has since addressed these problems.

Under carefully crafted regulations issued in October 2010, the "new" BCAP places greater restrictions on what qualifies as eligible biomass and how that material is collected and harvested, and it strengthens requirements for demonstration of sustainable forestry and agronomic practices.

Now, as the USDA is getting the opportunity to implement its improved rules, lawmakers want to cut off BCAP funding. This would be a mistake. Congress should sufficiently fund the improved program not only to establish a vibrant bioenergy industry, but because it could avert the kind of destruction under way in Arizona right now.

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