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Worsening Wildfires Need 'Paradigm Shift,' Lawmakers Agree

By Zach Bright

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- Infrastructure bill offers chance for agencies, Democrats say
 - Republicans point to forest management and litigation woes
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House Democrats and Republicans agreed at a hearing Tuesday that mitigating wildfires requires improved forest management, but remain split on the root causes that lead to worse fires.

Democrats on the House Natural Resources National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee maintained that the bipartisan infrastructure package signed into law last year provided an exclusive boost to the U.S. Agriculture Department's Forest Service and the Interior Department, as climate change exacerbates fires.

"This multilayered approach provides land management agencies with a generational opportunity to demonstrate a paradigm shift away from commercial management and emergency suppression, and towards fire adaptation and ecosystem services," Subcommittee Chair Joe Neguse (D-Colo.) said at the hearing.

Republican members repeated the call for a "paradigm shift," but singled out inefficient agency hierarchies and litigation from environmental groups as the major obstacles to proper forest management, avoiding climate change's contribution to increasing wildfire severity.

Funding, NEPA Reform

The bipartisan infrastructure law allocates \$3.4 billion over the next five years for wildfire mitigation and prevention, on top of giving Interior \$1.5 billion for wildland fire management and the U.S. Forest Service \$4.4 billion for forest management.

Rep. Yvette Herrell (R-N.M.) said the infrastructure package's forestry provisions "do little more than light money on fire by throwing millions of dollars at the wildfire crisis without pairing it with meaningful regulatory reform."

Rep. Tom Tiffany (R-Wis.) said federal agency overreach that dictates rules to local governments complicates the forest management process. Rep. Matt Rosendale (R-Mont.) pointed to recent decreases in timber as proof that poor management is failing to prevent wildfires. Rep. Tom McClintock (R-Calif.) criticized the Forest Service for failing to put out the beginnings of the Tamarack Fire, which grew to become the country's second largest wildfire.

"We put out 98% of fires on initial attack," Forest Service Deputy Chief Jaelith Hall-Rivera said in response at the hearing, "and the Tamarack Fire is one of those 2% that we were not able to do that because we were resource limited."

Multiple concerns also emerged over the National Environmental Policy Act's "Environmental Impact Statement" requirement, which Republican members said enabled environmental groups to litigate and gum up the Forest Service's ability to thin forests as a preventative fire measure.

"If we don't reform NEPA, we will be here ten years from now talking about the same thing," Tiffany said.

Across the aisle, Democrats asked Forest Service and Interior officials how the agencies would maintain environmental standards, meet management goals, and solve staffing shortages with the infrastructure bill.

Hall-Rivera called the funding a "significant down payment" and said that further preventative measures are needed, such as doubling the mechanical treatment of forests over the next 10 years. The Forest Service is on also track to fulfill full staffing goals, she added.

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