New Efforts to Fire Proof Our Forests: The Initiative Built into the 2014 Farm Bill

The controversy over how Governor Bullock went about nominating 5.1 million acres of federal land for “treatment” to reduce wildfire risks, has dramatized a somewhat hidden part of the recently passed Farm Bill. Even though many Republicans and Democrats had to hold their noses at the smelly mix of pork barrel and destructive subsidies in that bill, neither party wanted to go into the upcoming congressional elections having failed to pass a Farm Bill. Given that it was a bipartisan “must-pass” bill, members of congress could tag all sorts of special interest ornaments onto the bill.

It was one of these that got Governor Bullock crossways with some environmental groups in the state. The law called for each state governor to nominate federal forest lands that were an imminent risk to public health and safety and in immediate need of “forest restoration,” “insect control,” and “hazardous fuel reduction.” activities. These supposed emergency activities are to be fast tracked and approved with very limited environmental review. Working with a small group of hand-picked people, the Governor nominated 5.1 million acres of Montana for such “emergency treatment.”

Setting aside the question of how much of a public process should have been used before the Governor made his call, there are serious questions about whether commercially logging forests is a way to make forests healthy, safe, and productive. As with the development of most public policy, crafting forest management policy involves

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1 The Agricultural Act of 2014
2 Section 8204
dealing with a mix of strongly conflicting emotional commitments as well as conflicting objectives and very limited financial resources for implementation. The result, as some wit put it in the past is like making sausage. Watching that is almost enough to make you swear off eating sausage. What will be created in our forests from this provision of the farm bill may be equally distasteful.

Let us begin with how these “forest restoration” projects will be funded. There is, of course, limited money in the hands of the Forest Service and what they have is constantly being drained away to fight fires. The expedited forest “safety” “treatments” mandated under the new law will be paid for by harvesting commercially valuable logs. That is, the funding mechanism is commercial logging of the areas. That, of course, has cheered the Montana wood products industry that has seen overall timber harvest on Montana Forest Service lands fall off dramatically since the 1990s.

This would be fine if the trees that would be removed in a profit-oriented timber sale were the same trees that would be removed to reduce the flammability of the forest. It would also have to be true that the appropriate treatment of the site in terms of removing flammable material also contributed to the profitability of the sale. But that, of course, is not the case. The larger, commercially valuable trees should be left because they are less flammable and the tight bundles of scraggily packed small trees that will light up like a torch have no commercial value at all. The brush and logging waste on the forest floor also have no commercial value either. Because of this, “treating” these areas may well increase the likelihood that they will burn, not decrease it. In addition the effect of the “treatment” lasts only for a short time because opening up the forest encourages new growth of bushy and woody material as well as tight clumps of new
trees. These “treated” areas have to be repeatedly reentered to take out what is 100 percent non-commercial woody biomass. Usually there is no money left over to fund that; so it just does not happen and the flammability of the forest rises again quickly.

This is not just guess work or pessimistic brooding. One has to ask how these forest lands got into the condition they are in that led them to be labeled “dangerous” and in need of “emergency” treatment free of normal environmental standards and land use plans? As forest researchers in Montana have pointed out, the “flammable” condition of our forests at mid- and low-elevations is due primarily to human activities including:\(^3\)

1. Past logging that has left behind a more flammable landscape than had existed before it was logged.

2. Cattle grazing also contributes. It removes non-woody and less flammable ground cover and opens the forest floor to explosions of woody plants that burn hotter.

3. Fire suppression also contributes to forest flammability. That fire suppression aims to protect the economic production of the forest, that is, commercial timber harvest.

So management of the forest for commercial purposes tends to increase the flammability of the forest. Past logging not only did not reduce that “flammability” but seriously aggravated it. Yet “more of the same” is now supposed to save us. That is as logical as the alcoholic’s morning cure: a bit of the hair of the dog that bit you.

This is not to say that there is nothing we can do to protect our homes and communities from wildfire. But starting off with a proposal to treat over five million acres is headed the wrong direction: away from the problem areas immediately around our communities and homes. We should not be looking for landscape-wide solutions (which do not exist any way and are so expensive they would immediately bust whatever budget we have). We should look at local safety measures where we actually live, in the human-dominated landscapes we inhabit, not distant wildlands. That is both more effective in protecting people and property and it is affordable. In addition there are far fewer environmental problems since we would be focused on landscapes already committed to human use.