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American Issues: West

Timber sales rekindle protests

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The Pacific Northwest timber wars are heating up again over Congress's decision to allow logging of previously protected trees.

Environmentalists are angry that federal lawmakers last summer tucked away a measure in a spending bill that allows cutting of old-growth timber. Cutting has started in Oregon and Washington, rekindling protests.

President Clinton has called for a repeal of the legislation he signed last year that led to the cutting of old-growth timber on federal lands including national forests. The administration has said court interpretations of the law have allowed unacceptable cutting for thousands of healthy trees, including timber needed to protect fish and wildlife.

"We've made one or two mistakes under the law of unintended consequences, and one of them was the unintended and unwarranted consequence of the way that timber rider has been carried out," Clinton said in Seattle on Feb. 24.

White House press secretary Michael McCurry said the administration would ask Congress to provide either replacement timber allocation or buyout authority to end the cutting of timber in old-growth forests.

Meanwhile, timber industry workers who have lost up to 30,000 jobs in the region between 1990 and 1995 have little sympathy for environmentalists. To economically ravaged timber communities, the new law is a welcome sign of potential economic rehabilitation.

"Passions are running high," said Bob Dick of the Northwest Forest Association, a timber industry lobbying group. "We have people who have lost their homes, families, and jobs and they have been angry since 1991 or before.

Under the new law, the U.S. Forest Service can sell dead trees and fire-prone underbrush in national parks and wilderness areas.

While loggers are thankful for the new law's promise of work, critics claim the timber industry is taking advantage of the lessening of restrictions and is cutting down healthy trees and ancient old-growth forest. Such logging, critics claim, is threatening protected wildlife in Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Colorado and Kentucky.

Cutting in Oregon and Washington have already sparked a number of protests by environmental groups.

"It has brought the timber wars back to the woods, which is unfortunate," said Marty Hagan of the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund. "It has moved us back in time many, many years."

In Washington, environmentalist Ben White, 44, of Friends of Animals, hampered loggers temporarily in mid-February by climbing into a makeshift treehouse in the Olympic National Forest and refusing to come down for three days.

Other protesters in mid-February blocked a loggers' access road by pouring cement in a hole in the dirt road and encasing their feet in the cement. A dozen protesters were arrested that day. Several days later, more than 100 people were arrested as they trespassed at the same cutting operation.

We have people in the woods now who are going to try and stop the logging," said Susan Oseth, spokeswoman for Friends of Animals. "They are going to get back up in the trees and refuse to move."

Among the areas the Forest Service will soon open to logging are 22 acres in the Okanagon National Forest in Oregon and a section of Thunder Mountain in Washington's Okanagon National Forest.

Environmentalists, including the Friends of animals, the Sierra Club and Wilderness Society, Seattle Audubon Society and the Washington Wildlife Federation, oppose opening the areas, home to such protected birds as the spotted owl and marbled murrelet. Protests are planned by members of some the groups.

Heidi Kelly, spokeswoman for Sen. Slade Gorton, R-Wash., who helped write the law, said the law is necessary to reduce a potential fire hazard and said the protesters are people "who object to any harvest."

But Rep. Elizabeth Furse, D-Ore., said the measure is "logging without laws" and has introduced a bill to repeal it.

Nevertheless, both sides agree the new rules give Forest Service officials authority to suspend many environmental protections when extracting old, dead timber. The affect on endangered species remains to be seen.

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