

going to come and will explain in detail why this is a bad idea. I think we started off with the right goal, to help seniors pay for prescription drugs. Today, with this bill, we will have failed in meeting that goal. That is why I oppose it.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, I am under the impression that there will be a session of the Senate either tomorrow or on Monday or on Tuesday or on any number of those days. I am also under the impression that the Senate is rapidly, hopefully, approaching a sine die date for adjournment.

Being confronted with those expectations, I want to make a speech about Thanksgiving. I don't want it to appear in today's RECORD, necessarily, but I would ask for it to appear in the RECORD of the last day's session prior to Thanksgiving, whatever day that is.

I make such a unanimous consent request, that my speech not appear in today's RECORD but that it appear in the RECORD of the last day of the session prior to Thanksgiving.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

(The remarks of Mr. BYRD are printed in a future edition of the RECORD.)

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, I yield the floor. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BURNS). Without objection, it is so ordered.

HEALTHY FORESTS RESTORATION ACT OF 2003—CONFERENCE REPORT

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate now proceed to the consideration of the conference report to H.R. 1904, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, the report will be stated.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

The committee of conference on the disagreeing votes of the two Houses on the amendments of the Senate to the bill (H.R. 1904) to improve the capacity of the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior to plan and conduct hazardous fuels reduction projects on National Forest System lands and Bureau of Land Management lands aimed at protecting communities, watersheds, and certain other at-risk lands from catastrophic wildfire, to enhance

efforts to protect watersheds and address threats to forest and rangeland health, including catastrophic wildfire, across the landscape, and for other purposes, having met, have agreed that the House recede from its disagreement to the amendment of the Senate to the text of the bill and agree to the same with an amendment, and the Senate agree to the same; that the House recede from its disagreement to the amendment of the Senate to the title of the bill and agree to the same, signed by a majority of the conferees on the part of both Houses.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the conference report.

(The conference report is printed in the House proceedings of November 20, 2003.)

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I am pleased to present to the Senate the conference report on the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

Senators may remember that this bill was passed by the Senate on October 30 by a vote of 80 to 14. It embodied a bipartisan agreement to improve forest health on both public and private lands. It provides Federal land managers the tools to implement scientifically supported management practices on Federal forests, in consultation with local communities. It also establishes new conservation programs to improve water quality and regenerate declining forests on private lands. The legislation will reduce the amount of time and expense required to conduct hazardous fuel projects.

The conference report retains provisions adopted by the Senate that will protect old growth forests. It improves the processes for administrative and judicial review of hazardous fuel projects. But it will continue to require rigorous but expedited environmental analysis of such projects.

The conference report specifically encourages collaboration between Federal agencies and local communities to treat hazardous fuels that threaten communities and their sensitive watersheds. It provides for expedited environmental analysis of hazardous fuel reduction projects adjacent to communities that are at risk to catastrophic wildfire. It requires spending at least 50 percent of Federal hazardous fuels reduction funds to protect communities.

It requires courts considering legal actions to stop a hazardous fuel reduction project to balance the environmental effects of undertaking the project against those of not carrying it out. And in carrying out hazardous fuel reduction projects in areas that may contain old growth forests, it requires Federal agencies to protect or restore these forests.

In other areas, it requires agencies to maintain older trees consistent with the objective of restoring fire resilient stands. It authorizes \$720 million annually for hazardous fuels reduction activities. It provides grants for removal of hazardous fuels and other biomass to encourage their utilization for energy and other products. It provides for assistance to private land owners to pro-

tect and restore healthy watershed conditions.

It authorizes research projects designed to evaluate ways to treat forests to reduce their susceptibility to insects, diseases and fire. It also authorizes agreements and easements with private landowners to protect and enhance habitats for endangered and threatened species. And it encourages more effective monitoring and early warning programs for insect and disease outbreaks.

This conference report would not be possible without the active involvement of Senators on both sides of the aisle who worked hard together to develop this bill. I especially appreciate the able assistance of the distinguished Senator from Idaho, Mr. CRAPO, who chairs the Forestry Subcommittee of the Senate Agriculture Committee; the Energy Committee chairman, the distinguished Senator from New Mexico, Mr. DOMENICI, and his Forestry Subcommittee chair from Idaho, Mr. CRAIG, were also very helpful in guiding this legislation along its path passage.

The Agriculture Committee also had assistance of Senator LINCOLN of Arkansas and active involvement on her part in developing the bill, and we also had the benefit of suggestions and assistance from Senators WYDEN and FEINSTEIN who came to me early and asked to be a part of the effort to develop this bill. They were involved along with many others whose contributions were necessary to make the approval of this bill possible.

The Agriculture Committee also benefited from the assignment of an employee of the Forest Service, Doug MacCleery, who assisted our staff in the development of this legislation. We appreciate his assistance. And our committee staff did a superb job under the able direction of the Agriculture Committee staff director, Hunt Shipman.

Let's not forget, it was President Bush, the President of the United States, who recommended in the first place that Congress act on a healthy forest initiative. It was at his suggestion and his urgings that we pushed and pushed until we finally achieved success, with the adoption today by the other body of the conference report, on this bill. I must also mention the able assistance of his Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman, who provided valuable insight and assistance all along the way.

I urge the Senate approve this conference report.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho.

Mr. CRAPO. Mr. President, this is truly a historic day. As the Presiding Officer knows, we have worked literally for a decade or more to try to find a path forward in the area of finding a solution to the problems we face in our national forests.

In recent years, we have seen an average of 4 million acres a year burn. We have seen devastating wildfires this

year that have destroyed not only tremendous amounts of property and environment in our forests, but have also taken lives. We have seen insect infestations that have jeopardized the future of one of the most incredible environmental resources we have in America, our forests.

All of it has occurred while we have been battling in the courts, trying to find a path forward simply to allow our forest managers the ability to implement their forest management decisions, to deal with insect infestation, to deal with the threat of catastrophic wildfire, and to help preserve the great legacy we have in America, in our forests.

I stand today to thank those in our Senate conference who have worked with us to build and strengthen the bipartisan solution that has brought us to this point.

Sitting here beside me is the Senator from Mississippi, THAD COCHRAN, chairman of the Agriculture Committee. Without Senator COCHRAN's able leadership, without his patience and his wisdom in guiding us through this process, we would not be here today. I want to personally thank him. I thank him, as well, on behalf of a grateful Nation for the skill and the patience he has given us to help bring this bill forward.

Also, I thank Senator LARRY CRAIG, my colleague from Idaho, who has worked on this issue tirelessly for the better part of the last decade to try to help bring America to an understanding of the need for reform, and for helping us work through a bipartisan solution in the Senate. Senator CRAIG deserves great praise and commendation for his untiring work to help give us the possibility of being here today—just a short time away from successfully passing in both the House and the Senate this Healthy Forests legislation.

Also, Senator DOMENICI, chairman of the Energy Committee, has worked tirelessly on this issue and he deserves to be thanked for his tremendous efforts. Not many people follow it this closely, but there is forestry jurisdiction in both the Energy Committee and the Agriculture Committee. Senator COCHRAN chairs the Agriculture Committee, and Senator DOMENICI the Energy Committee. By coincidence, both of the Idaho Senators chair the respective subcommittees on forestry. Senator CRAIG chairs the subcommittee on forestry in the Energy Committee, and I chair the forestry subcommittee on the Agriculture Committee. Together, on the Republican side, we have developed a strong team to work in the Senate.

I also thank Senator BLANCHE LINCOLN, from Arkansas, for stepping forward as the ranking member on the forestry subcommittee and working with me to develop the senate bill that set the mark for improving this legislation and moving it through the Senate. We then expanded that bipartisan base

and worked with Senators FEINSTEIN from California, WYDEN from Oregon, and others, including additional Republicans and Democrats, all of whom came together to bring a bipartisan solution to the Chamber.

It was not easy. There were many who wanted to use this issue to further their political efforts, to either cause further strife and conflict on the issue surrounding our forests or to simply promote some agenda that was not consistent with our efforts to move forward on a bipartisan basis to protect and preserve our forests.

We fought many battles over the last 2 or 3 months, and they were the resulting, concluding battles in a crescendo that has been developing over the last decade. When we were done, we needed to work with the House of Representatives. There was concern at that point. There was actually another filibuster to stop us from even going into conference with the House because there was concern that the bill would be changed too much in ways that would not allow us to find a common consensus-based path forward.

Yet we have gone on together, again, in that bipartisan fashion that we developed in the Senate to work in a bicameral fashion and bipartisan fashion with the House to come together with this legislation that is now before us.

As many of us said as we developed this legislation, it is not necessarily what any of us would have written had we had complete control over the issue. But it is the result of what can happen if we work across party lines, across the lines of the rotunda between the House and Senate, and across regional lines in our Nation, to try to make sure that we get past the politics, the partisanship, past the personal attacks, and focus on the principles that will allow us to move forward and develop positive legislation such as that.

I am confident this legislation will pass the Senate today. I am confident that when it goes to the President's desk, he will sign it. The United States will have taken a very big step forward in terms of preserving one of the great environmental legacies we have—our forests; we will have taken a step to protect and preserve our rural areas in America; we will have done much to protect our great firefighters, many of whom gave their lives this year, and in previous years, in trying to protect our forests and our communities; we will have put statutory protection in place for old-growth forests in our Nation; we will have worked to develop small-diameter timber and other uses of those parts of our forests that need thinning; we will have taken steps to make sure that rural communities such as Elk City, ID—literally at the end of the road—do not face the potential devastation a wildfire could cause not only to their economy but to their safety and the community at large; we will have protected the wildland urban interface, where so many of the people who now live in urban areas find their

homes and lives and property threatened by the danger of uncontrolled wildfire.

All of these things will be brought together because we were successful today and, over the past few years, in bringing together the kind of politics that America wants, the kind of politics that is good and beneficial, that helps us to cross the divisions and eliminate those conflicts that so often bring us to a stalemate or a stall on the floor of the Senate or on the floor of the House.

Mr. President, again, I thank all Senators and all of the House Members who have done so much to look past their own individual concerns and to work together for the collective good of the whole as we built this strong bipartisan solution to a critical issue facing our Nation.

With that, I yield the floor.

Mr. DASCHLE. Mr. President, I am pleased to support the conference report on the Healthy Forest initiative.

The question of how we effectively and efficiently deal with the threat of wildfire is a complex one, and I have been committed to finding a solution that will provide the Forest Service with additional tools, can win approval in the Senate, and can become law. This bipartisan compromise meets that test.

As I toured the Black Hills National Forest this August, it was clear that the Forest Service needs additional tools to address the increasing fire risk to South Dakota communities. There are currently over 460,000 acres of the Black Hills National Forest that are in moderate to high fire risk. And, it is increasing. The Forest Service estimates that over 550,000 acres will fall into this category in the next 10 years if we do nothing to address it.

It is clear that we must find a way to allow Forest Service personnel to spend less time in the office planning, and more time in the forest actually clearing high fuel loads.

This legislation takes major steps to do just that. The legislation provides communities more flexibility in defining what should be considered priority areas as well as incentives to work near communities. It clarifies how much detail is needed for environmental analysis of fuel reduction projects. The conference report adopts the Senate-passed streamlined appeals process, expediting decisions for fuel-reduction projects while ensuring that the public has an opportunity to be heard early in the developmental stages forest restoration projects. And, it includes Senate-passed language encouraging speedy disposition of any projects that are challenged in court without giving undue deference to any party.

While the legislation is not exactly how I would have written it, I think it is the best shot we have to get something meaningful enacted into law this year. I am please the House has passed

this legislation and encourage my colleagues to pass it, and hope the President will quickly sign it into law.

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, I rise to urge my colleagues to support the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. This bill is extremely important to the west and to my constituents as we look for ways to reduce the risk of large and dangerous wildfires that threaten our homes and communities. You just have to look at the devastating fire season Montana went through this past summer to understand why we feel so strongly about this issue.

I have said that a healthy forests bill must first allow Federal agencies and communities to address dangerous fuel loadings on a local level, quickly and efficiently. Second, it must support small, independent mills and put local people to work in the forests and the mills. Third, it must promote and protect citizen involvement and be fair to the principals underlying the federal judicial system. And finally, it must protect special and sensitive places.

We have achieved that with this legislation.

My one disappointment is that the conference committee stripped out the Rural Community Forestry Enterprise Program. I worked together with Senators CRAPO and LEAHY to include this program in the Senate bill, first in the Agriculture Committee and then as part of the Senate-passed bill.

The Rural Community Forestry Enterprise Program would bring much needed support for building and maintaining a thriving forest industry in rural communities.

Just as this industry is important to maintaining the economic vitality of these small and often remote communities, it is vital to meeting the objectives of this legislation. We cannot afford to lose more mills and highly skilled forest industry workers in Montana. We cannot accomplish needed hazardous fuel reduction work without them.

I would like to share with you concerns I heard today about the removal of the Community Enterprise Program from a friend, Jim Hurst, the owner and operator of a small family-owned mill called Owens and Hurst, in Eureka, Montana.

He said:

Small mill owners like myself and Ron Buentemeier, the General Manager of F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Company in Columbia Falls, told you we needed this type of help to make the Small Business Set-Aside program more responsive to the needs of small, independent and mostly family-owned mills across Montana. You responded with the Community Enterprise program.

This is an important program and should be put back into the Healthy Forests Bill. Independents have been under long-time family ownership and because of that my family and the other families who own mills know that we each have one heck of a responsibility to our communities. This Community Enterprise program would help the independents who have been impacted the hardest by reduced federal timber supply.

They have shown their mettle and have been courageous. We need to keep fighting for small mill owners, operators and the rural communities who depend on these small mills for their livelihood.

While I will continue to work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to ensure a thriving forest industry in our rural communities, it is imperative to pass this legislation now. I believe we do have a serious problem with the buildup of hazardous forest fuels and that we need to do a better job of addressing it now.

The legislation has the elements necessary to allow local citizens and leaders to make wise decisions that address this problem efficiently and effectively and I urge my colleagues to support it. I would like to thank several Senators for their hard work on this bill, including Senators WYDEN, FEINSTEIN, CRAPO, LINCOLN and COCHRAN. Without their dedicated efforts and leadership that I was very pleased to support, we would not be the close to passing this bill today.

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President: I rise today in strong support of the conference report for the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003.

I especially thank my colleagues—Senator COCHRAN, Senator DOMENICI, Senator CRAPO, Senator CRAIG, Senator LINCOLN, Senator WYDEN, and Senator FEINSTEIN for the leadership they demonstrated in addressing this national crisis that affects all Americans, particularly those who live in the urban-wildland interface.

The conference report is a major step forward toward preventing the severe wildland forest and rangeland fires that have become an annual event. What is more important is that the human tragedy associated with wildfires the heartbreak of losing one's home and possessions, the economic losses, and the dangers that wildfires pose to our devoted wildland firefighters will be reduced through the sound forest management practices provided for in this legislation.

The 2002 and 2003 fire seasons have been some of the worst on record nationally. Forest fires continue to create extensive problems for many Americans, predominantly for those living and working in the West. In 2002, Alaska alone experienced fires that burned more than one million acres.

These catastrophic wildfires caused great damage to our forested lands; many were already vulnerable as a result of unaddressed insect and disease damage.

Deteriorating forest and rangeland health now affects more than 190 million acres of public land, an area twice the size of California.

In my home State of Alaska, the damage caused by the spruce bark beetle, especially on the Kenai Peninsula has been devastating. Over 5 million acres of trees in south central and interior Alaska have been lost to insects over the last 10 years.

I am particularly enthusiastic that this legislation authorizes and expe-

ditions fuel reduction treatment on Federal land on which the existence of disease or insect infestation has occurred, such as those on the Kenai Peninsula. Federal land managers will now be able to manage these dead and dying tree stands.

The key to long-term forest management on the Kenai Peninsula is to manage the forested landscape for a variety of species compositions, structures and age classes; not simply unmanaged stands. The legislation before us will do just that, and will prevent a reoccurrence of the type of spruce bark beetle mortality we have experienced in Alaska.

I firmly believe that this conference report is a comprehensive plan focused on giving Federal land managers and their partners the tools they need to respond to a national forest health crisis. The legislation directs the timely implementation of scientifically supported management activities to protect the health and vibrancy of Federal forest ecosystems as well as the communities and private lands that surround them.

Under this legislation, the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture will conduct authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act with a critical, streamlined process.

Additionally, for those authorized fuel reduction projects proposed to be conducted in the wildland-urban interface, the Secretaries will be able to expedite such projects without the need to analyze and describe more than the proposed agency action and one alternative action. In other words, we can now get the work on the ground done quickly.

Still, the Secretaries must continue to provide for public comment during the preparation of any environmental assessment or EIS for these authorized hazardous fuel reduction projects. The public process is not undermined in this legislation.

I also support the proposed new administrative review process associated with these authorized fuel reduction projects. Too often we have become mired in administrative appeal gridlock in this country at the expense of communities at risk to wildland fire. We saw such devastation recently in the State of California.

This legislation will establish a fair and balanced predecisional review process. Specific, written comments must be submitted during the scoping or public comment period.

Additionally, civil actions may be brought in Federal district court only if the person has exhausted his/her administrative review process. The legislation will foreclose venue-shopping.

It encourages the courts to weigh the environmental consequences of management inaction when the potential devastation from fires could occur. This provision is important public policy and demonstrates to the American people that the risk of catastrophic

wildfire must be known, understood and respected in our judicial system and acted upon quickly.

I am also excited about title 2 of the legislation which will encourage the production of energy from biomass. Developing energy from biomass could provide a tremendous boost to the local economy on the Kenai Peninsula while reducing the dangerous wildland fire risks that exists there. That is a win-win solution. The biomass provision is innovative, environmentally sound and a good approach in achieving healthy forests.

The bipartisan legislation before us is good for the nation and good for Alaska. I will enthusiastically support its passage today.

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, southern California has recently experienced the devastating impacts of wildfire firsthand. More than 750,000 acres burned, and 24 people died. We have seen how important it is to take the appropriate steps to protect our vulnerable communities from the threat of wildfire, and that is why I am supporting this bill.

The bill before us invests in preventing wildfires, rather than just trying to fight them after the fact. Each year, \$760 million is authorized for wildfire prevention projects, such as tree and brush removal, thinning, and prescribed burning. In total, the bill would allow treatment of 20 million acres. Priority is given to projects that protect communities and watersheds, and at least 50 percent of the funds must be used near at-risk communities. The other 50 percent will be spent on projects near municipal water supply systems and on lands infested with disease or insects. This is a good start at preventing fires.

I do, however, have to mention my deep disappointment with the House Republican conferees for removing my amendment to help firefighters who battle the biggest fires. I am almost speechless that the House Republicans would turn their backs on our brave firefighters.

My amendment, which passed the Senate 94 to 3, would have required long-term health monitoring of firefighters who fought fires in a Federal disaster area. These firefighters are exposed to several toxins known to be harmful to long-term health, including fine particulates, carbon monoxide, sulfur, formaldehyde, mercury, heavy metals, and benzene. This amendment was important to the firefighters in my State and was supported by the International Association of Firefighters.

I pledge to the firefighters, this is not over. I will be back to continue fighting on behalf of all firefighters who are put at risk in Federal disasters.

I am also disappointed that the conferees dropped another amendment of mine, which was included in the Senate-passed bill. My amendment required the EPA to provide each of its regional offices a mobile air pollution monitoring network, so that in the

event of a catastrophe, toxic emissions could be monitored and the public could know the health risks.

Despite the fact that the conferees dropped my two amendments, I believe this bill will help protect communities from the threat of wildfires, which is why I am supporting it.

Mrs. FEINSTEIN. Mr. President, today's vote to pass the Healthy Forests legislation is a major bipartisan victory. This is not just because it is the first major forest bill in 27 years.

Much more significantly, we have nourished the middle ground in the forest debate that is so often lost in the partisan rhetoric.

We actually can create good rural jobs, protect our communities, and restore our forest environment at the same time.

Let me repeat this: we can create rural jobs, protect our communities, and take action to restore the health of our forests at the same time.

Ever since I cosponsored the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Act 5 years ago, I have been working to bring together the rural, forest-dependent communities—rather than unnecessarily dividing them.

This bill goes a long way to that end throughout the West and the Nation.

There are many people who deserve credit for this bill, but there are a few Senators in particular to whom I want to give special thanks. Senators PETE DOMENICI and LARRY CRAIG were the best bipartisan allies I could ever ask for in terms of how they approached this issue.

Even though they are in the majority, Senators DOMENICI and CRAIG realized that a forestry bill needed a bipartisan coalition. They worked in good faith with me and Senator WYDEN from start to finish, and I am deeply grateful for it.

I also want to thank Senator COCHRAN, the chairman of the conference on this bill, for his leadership throughout the process. Senator COCHRAN ably and skillfully represented the Senate position in the negotiations. I particularly want to emphasize that his staff conducted the conference in a fine and fair manner throughout, and it's a credit to his leadership.

There are many others Senators who played critical roles in this process, including Senators CRAPO, KYL, LINCOLN, MCCAIN, BAUCUS, and BINGAMAN.

I finally want to thank Senator WYDEN, the ranking member on the Forestry Subcommittee of the Energy Committee. He is as good a ranking member and as good a leader on forestry as the Democrats could ever have.

I also want to say that I second his views on the meaning of the different parts of the bill in his statement today. As the two principal Democratic negotiators of this bill, he and I are in complete accord as to the meaning of its contents.

This legislation H.R. 1904, approved by a House-Senate conference com-

mittee today is very similar to a bill passed by the Senate last month, with priority given toward removing dead and dying trees and dangerously thick underbrush in areas nearest communities as well as targeting areas where insects have devastated forests. This is especially important in California, where hundreds of thousands of trees have been killed by the bark beetle, creating tinderbox conditions.

While the recent wildfires in Southern California have been contained, these deadly fires consumed a total of 738,158 acres, killed 23 people, and destroyed approximately 3,626 residences and 1,184 other structures. Clearly, we must do everything we can to avert such a catastrophe in the future. The National Forest Service estimates that 57 million acres of Federal land are at the highest risk of catastrophic fire, including 8.5 million in California, so it is critical that we protect our forests and nearby communities.

More than 57 million acres of Federal land at the highest risk of catastrophic fire, including 8.5 million in California. In the past 5 years alone, wildfires have raged through over 27 million acres, including nearly 3 million acres in California. It is critical that Congress acts to protect our forests and nearby communities.

The House-Senate agreement both speeds up the process for reducing hazardous fuels and provides the first legal protection for old growth in our nation's history.

Let me describe what the legislation would do.

Critically, it would establish an expedited process so the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior can get to work on brush-clearing projects to minimize the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

Up to 20 million acres of lands near communities, municipal watersheds and other high-risk areas can be treated. This includes lands that have suffered from serious wind damage or insect epidemics, such as the bark beetle.

We made an important change to the bill's language in section 102(a)(4) in the conference report. In the Senate-passed bill, the insect and disease exception was related to infestations, whereas in the conference bill, the exception has been clarified to apply only where there is a presence of an epidemic of insects or disease. By its own terms, an insect or disease-related event of "epidemic" proportions is different from "endemic" insects and disease, which are present in a naturally functioning forest ecosystem.

Under the final bill, only epidemics are given special treatment. This is an important distinction.

A total of \$760 million annually for hazardous fuel reduction is authorized by the legislation, a \$340 million increase over current funding.

At least 50 percent of the funds would be used for fuels reduction near communities.

The legislation also requires that large, fire-resilient, old-growth trees be protected from logging immediately.

It mandates that forest plans that are more than 10 years old and most in need of updating must be updated with old growth protection consistent with the national standard within 2 to 3 years.

Without this provision in the amendment, we would likely have to wait a decade or more to see improved old-growth protection. And even then there would be no guarantee that this protection—against the threat of both logging and catastrophic fire—would be very strong.

In California, the amendment to the Sierra Nevada Framework that is currently in progress will have to comply with the new national standard for old-growth protection.

Let me explain how the agreement improves and shortens the administrative review process and makes it more collaborative and less confrontational. It is critical that the Forest Service can spend the scarce dollars in the federal budget in doing vital work on the ground, rather than being mired in endless paperwork.

The legislation fully preserves multiple opportunities for meaningful public involvement. People can attend a public meeting on every project, and they can submit comments during both the preparation of the environmental impact statement and during the administrative review process. I guarantee you the public will have a meaningful say in these projects.

The legislation changes the environmental review process so the Forest Service still considers the effects of the proposed project in detail, but can focus its analysis on the project proposal, one reasonable alternative that meets the project's goals and the alternative of not doing the project, instead of the 5-9 alternatives now often required.

In the highest priority areas within 1½ miles of communities, the Forest Service need only study the proposed action and not alternatives. There is no relaxation from current law, however, in how closely the Forest Service must study the environmental effects of the project it is proposing to undertake.

The legislation replaces the current Forest Service administrative appeals with an administrative review process that will occur after the Forest Service finishes its environmental review of a project, but before it reaches its decision. This new approach is similar to a process adopted by the Clinton administration in 2000 for review of forest plans and amendments to those plans. The process will be speedier and less confrontational than the current administrative appeal process.

Next I want to turn to judicial review. I want to emphasize that cases will be heard more quickly under the legislation and abuses of the process will be checked, but nothing alters citizens' opportunity for fair and thorough court review.

Parties can sue in Federal court only on issues raised in the administrative

review process. This is a commonsense provision that allows agencies the opportunity to correct their own mistakes before everything gets litigated.

Lawsuits must be filed in the same jurisdiction as the proposed project.

Courts are encouraged to resolve the case as soon as possible.

Preliminary injunctions are limited to 60 days, although they can be extended if appropriate. This provision sends a signal to courts not to delay important brush-clearing projects indefinitely unless there really is a good reason to do so.

The court must weigh the environmental benefit of doing a given project against its environmental risks as it reviews the case.

In closing, I want to say that my colleagues and I have been trying to come to an agreement on a forest bill for several years. We finally broke through the deadlock.

I am deeply pleased that we are enacting this legislation to give the residents of southern California and elsewhere a better chance against the fires that will come next time.

SECTION 105(C)(3)(B)

Mrs. FEINSTEIN. I have a question for the Senator from Oregon as to the meaning of one specific provision of the conference report on the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. This provision is section 105(c)(3)(B), which sets forth an exception to the general requirement that parties must participate in the administrative review process before raising claims in Federal court. I don't understand the conference report and statement of the managers as doing anything to change the parties' preexisting obligations as to environmental review except as explicitly provided in the statute. Do you agree, as the ranking member on the Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources?

Mr. WYDEN. I have the same understanding of this matter as the Senator from California.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I will oppose the conference report on H.R. 1904, the so-called Healthy Forests Act. While I have several substantive concerns about this legislation, let me first speak about the process by which this legislation has come before the Senate.

As my colleagues know, there has been a significant and growing concern about the way the other side is operating conference committees. In fact this conference was delayed several weeks because the minority has continually been excluded from conferences.

However, in good faith, I, along with interested Members and their staffs, worked out an agreement on the first six titles of the bill. Coincidentally, there were only six titles in the House version of the bill. An agreement was reached on those first six titles, and while I still had serious concerns about the substance of the agreement, I did not object to the process moving for-

ward. I did so because I was given commitments that we would work out an agreement between the House and Senate on the remaining three titles that were passed by the Senate.

But what happened next is absolutely astounding. One half hour before the conference committee was scheduled to meet, I was informed that the conference would only consider the first six titles of the bill, and that the remaining titles that were passed by the Senate were "off the table."

Yet another backroom deal was cut by the other side to exclude the minority from any real conference proceedings.

These were highly important provisions that were passed by the Senate. Of particular importance to me was the Rural Community Forestry Enterprise Program, which I authored with Senators CRAPO and BAUCUS. In my State of Vermont we have a good deal of small-diameter trees for which we need help finding markets. This program would build on the existing expertise of the Forest Service by providing technical assistance, cooperative marketing and new product development to small timber-dependent communities. Whether it is producing furniture, pallets, or other creative new markets, this program would help small forest-dependent communities expand economically.

Back room deals summarily excluded this, and several other important initiatives in the Senate-passed bill, from consideration in the conference committee. That is why I declined to sign this conference report.

I will not vote for this conference report because this bill before us remains a well-camouflaged attempt to limit the right of the American people to know and to question what their Government is doing on the public's lands.

The bill before us is really a solution looking for a problem. So let's take a closer look at the "solution" on the table.

First, the bill would make it much more difficult for the public to have any oversight or say in what happens on public lands, undermining decades of progress in public inclusion. In this new and vague pre-decisional protest process, this bill expects the public to have intimate knowledge of aspects of the project early on, including aspects that the Forest Service might not have disclosed in its initial proposal.

The bill gives the Forest Service a real incentive to hide the ball or to withhold certain information about a project that might make it objectionable, such as endangered species habitat data, watershed analysis, or road-building information. If concerns are not raised about this possibly undisclosed information in the vaguely outlined "predecisional" process, the Forest Service can argue to the courts that no claims can be brought on these issues in the future when the agency, either through intent or negligence, withholds important information from the public.

Essentially, this provision penalizes citizens and rewards agency staff when the agency does not do its job in terms of basic investigation and information sharing regarding a project. This bill makes other significant changes to judicial review. It will force judges to reconsider preliminary injunctions every 60 days, whether or not circumstances warrant it.

In many ways, this provision could backfire on my colleagues' goal of expediting judicial review. It will force judges to engage in otherwise unnecessary proceedings, slowing their consideration of the very cases that proponents of H.R. 1904 want to fast track. Moreover, taking the courts' time to engage in this process will also divert scarce judicial resources away from other pending cases. It is also likely to encourage more lawsuits. Requiring that injunctions be renewed every 60 days, whether needed or not, gives lawyers another bite at the apple, something they often find hard to resist.

Instead of telling the courts when and how to conduct their business, we should instead be working to find a workable and effective approach to reducing wildfire risks.

This bill does not achieve that, but, with these provisions that minimize the public's input, it instead poses a real risk to the checks and balances that the American people and their independent judiciary now have on Government decisions affecting the public lands owned by the American people.

Sadly, this bill plays a bait-and-switch trick on communities threatened by wildfires. It is not fair to roll back environmental laws, public oversight, or judicial review under the guise of reacting to devastating wildfires. It will do nothing to help or to prevent the kind of devastation that southern California recently faced. It is a special interest grab-bag shrouded behind a smokescreen.

We should be offering real help and real answers, instead of allowing fear to be used as a pretext for taking the public's voice out of decisions affecting the public's lands and for ceding more power to special interests.

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. COCHRAN. I understand we can proceed to adopt the conference report on a voice vote since there is no objection to that. First, I am happy to yield to the assistant majority leader.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I will not object. I simply came to the floor to congratulate the distinguished Senator from Mississippi and the Senator from Idaho for an extraordinary

job on a very difficult subject on which they have worked for years. I commend them both so much for this very important piece of legislation.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. If there is no further debate, the question is on agreeing to the conference report.

The conference report was agreed to.

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I move to reconsider the vote.

Mr. CRAPO. I move to lay that motion on the table.

The motion to lay on the table was agreed to.

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MEDICARE PRESCRIPTION BENEFITS

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, I would like to speak a few minutes about the upcoming Medicare conference report that will be before this body—I don't know when—maybe Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. Before I do so, I would like to thank and compliment many people who helped bring this legislation to this point. For many years, many of us in Congress have urged the passage of prescription drug benefits legislation for seniors. We have been close to passage many times in the last several years.

I remember last year, for example, about this time when Congress was close to adjournment. I called a meeting together in my office for one last chance—Senator KENNEDY, Senator SNOWE, myself, Senator HATCH, and other Senators who were vitally concerned about passing prescription drug legislation. We worked mightily. We worked very hard. At the very end, the talks collapsed. It didn't work, largely for political, partisan reasons, I might add, and we were not able to get a bill passed.

Here we are again. We are at the brink. We are on the verge. We are very close to getting prescription drug legislation passed. This time I very much hope that all of us—as Senators and House Members—put partisan differences aside and suspend judgment. That is, we should look at the legislation, look at the facts, and not listen to the rhetoric from various groups, to see what really makes sense.

There are a number of people I wish to thank at this time—the chairman of the committee, Senator CHUCK GRASSLEY, who has worked very hard; Senator BREAU, also a member of the committee; Senator OLYMPIA SNOWE, a member of the committee.

In addition, Congressman BILL THOMAS, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, has worked extremely dili-

gently. The Speaker of the House, the majority leader of the House, TOM DELAY; the majority leader of the Senate, BILL FRIST—there are many people who have worked very hard. I thank them very much for their efforts and for their work.

One person I also wish to thank is Senator TED KENNEDY. Senator KENNEDY worked very hard to help us pass prescription drug legislation in the Senate not too many weeks ago. He worked very hard. He worked with me. He worked with the minority leader. He worked with the majority leader. He worked with various Members of the Senate who were critical to passage of the bill.

I thank Senator KENNEDY for his yeoman's work to help pass prescription drug benefits legislation in the Senate. He also worked very hard to help get a conference report put together. He spent a good deal of time with the conferees, with myself, with the Senator from South Dakota, Mr. DASCHLE, the Senator from Tennessee, Mr. FRIST, and many other people trying to help get prescription drug legislation passed. I regret at this point that he and I have a different view of this bill. He believes there are certain flaws in this bill. I think this is a good bill and should be passed. Nevertheless, Senators should know that Senator TED KENNEDY has done a great job in helping move this legislation to the point it is today. Without his efforts, this bill would be flawed in many areas. He helped make this, in my judgment, quite a good bill.

Why should we pass prescription drug benefits legislation? I suppose the main reason is that times have changed so dramatically. In 1965, when Medicare was enacted—and it was enacted by a large vote margin—prescription drugs were not necessary. Most senior citizens were more concerned with doctors, office calls, and hospital visits for their medical concerns, rather than prescription drugs.

Look what has happened in the last 38 years since the Medicare Act passed. Prescription drugs and generic drugs are so vitally important today. They replace procedures. They help prevent the onset of disease. Often times, the medications people take tend to prevent, forestall, and delay all kinds of maladies. They are really important, much more important today and getting more important every day.

In addition, prescription drugs are becoming more expensive—much more expensive—and it is putting seniors in a bind. Many low-income seniors are in a real bind.

I worked at a pharmacy during one of my work days at home. I have worked at many different jobs in Montana. I show up at 8 o'clock in the morning with a sack lunch. I have worked in sawmills, I have waited tables. One day I was working in a pharmacy in Montana. I saw senior citizens walk up to the pharmacist in a quiet voice and ask how perhaps they could change their