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A Misdirected Forest Strategy

A year ago, President Bush used the the worst of last summer's forest fires, the Biscuit fire in southern Oregon, as a backdrop to unveil his Healthy Forests initiative — a plan that on close inspection has less to do with preventing forest fires than it does with helping his friends in the timber industry. In a replay yesterday, Mr. Bush used a visit to the site of the Aspen fire in Arizona to reaffirm his support for the same strategy. The strategy has not improved with age. Indeed, as encapsulated in legislation that was passed by the House and is nearing approval in the Senate, it may have gotten worse.

On its face, the plan seems innocent enough. It would increase the Forest Service's fire-prevention budget and presumably the service's ability to stop fires before they happen by aggressively thinning overgrown forests and deliberately setting controlled fires to prevent even bigger blazes. The problem with the plan is that it is hopelessly, perhaps deliberately, vague. It does not specifically require that the money be spent where it would obviously do the most good, at the urbanized edges of the forests, where homeowners and their property are most at risk. Indeed, its mandate is so broad that it practically invites commercial logging on millions of acres in remote areas of the national forests, where fires pose little or no threat to people or property but where the trees are the biggest and the opportunities for profit are the largest.

In the name of expediting "fuel reduction," the plan would also ease important environmental laws, reduce the opportunity for public comment and restrict judicial review. The administration says it merely wants to stop frivolous lawsuits that block important projects. Several academic and government studies, including two by the General Accounting Office, have said that the administration's claims are mostly invention, and that citizen reviews and accepted legal processes have posed no real obstacle to fire prevention.

The biggest obstacle is that the government is spending the money in the wrong place. Even the communities he wants to help say Mr. Bush has his priorities wrong. The Arizona Daily Star noted in an editorial yesterday that there had been only one legal challenge in three years to a fuel-reduction project in the Coronado National Forest, the site of the Aspen fire, and that it had been settled expeditiously. Meanwhile, local pleas for more targeted tree-thinning around the communities damaged by the fire had gone unanswered.