



Covington, GC Trust take off gloves

By GARY GHIOTO

Sun Staff Reporter

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Passage last week of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act in the U.S. House has split two powerful environmental allies: the Flagstaff-based Grand Canyon Trust and W. Wallace Covington, professor of forest ecology and director of the Ecological Restoration Institute at Northern Arizona University.

The bill eases legal and regulatory requirements to fast-track "forest health" logging projects on 20 million acres adjacent to western communities.

Covington backs it and the Trust opposes it, with the Trust charging that Covington is allowing himself to be used as a scientific "poster child" for a political bill so that Congress will continue to fund his local thinning and restoration projects.

U.S. Rep. Rick Renzi, R-Flagstaff, and other Republicans on the House Resources Committee, believe environmental regulations that allow appeals and lawsuits have been abused by conservation groups that are opposed to any logging in the national forests.

Both Covington's ERI and the Trust played roles in a bill by Colorado Republican U.S. Rep. Scott McInnis by providing testimony to the House Resources Committee that met in Flagstaff in March. Covington supported the bill and the Trust opposed it.

Tom Robinson of the Grand Canyon Trust said it's "ironic" that Covington is on board a bill based on faulty data -- ERI itself found there was little or no data to support claims by politicians that environmental groups had filed the bulk of appeals and lawsuits challenging forest health logging projects.

"Here you have a piece of legislation that is premised on the fact that we have a crisis based on too many environmental appeals and too much litigation. Then we have these incredibly detailed analyses that shows we don't have a crisis," he said.

Robinson said Covington is backing the McInnis bill so that pending legislation providing funding for ERI will pass unscathed in the Republican-dominated House and Senate. Covington also needs congressional funding to implement his controversial pre-settlement restoration model, said Robinson.

"If it doesn't pass, it threatens him getting money for his institute and it certainly constrains where he does restoration," said Robinson.

Added Robinson: "I'll be honest. He's being used. In my opinion, Congress ... is using a very well-known ... reputable scientist and holding him up as they pass this very political piece of legislation. He is the poster child for this bill."

Covington said he's certainly aware of ERI's research on appeals and litigation that downplayed the Republican call for urgency, but that he's "not a political scientist." He also predicted that when the Senate takes up the bill next month, the wording about appeals and litigation will probably be reviewed and amended.

As far as the Trust's claim he's being used by Republican politicians, Covington said ERI research is used by a variety of sources.

"I don't think that's worthy of any particular response. That's his opinion. I've seen my name used in good ways and bad ways. So I really don't feel I should respond to that," said Covington.

DEEPER THINNING, MORE FUNDING

Covington argued at the hearing that the bill should go beyond simple forest thinning projects within a half-mile of wildfire-threatened communities and tackle a growing forest ecosystem crisis.

The Trust advised the Republican-dominated House Resources Committee to reject claims that a law requiring comprehensive environmental review had caused "analysis paralysis" and hampered Forest Service approval of thinning projects.

Then Trust spokesman Brad Ack recommended Congress provide additional funding for the Forest Service so it could devote more staff to fulfill requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and get faster approval for thinning and fuels reduction projects.

A lengthy report and suggested legislation to accomplish that was provided to Renzi and the Resources Committee by the Trust.

But when the bill passed, 256-170, last week, only Covington's recommendations that thinning must occur around and beyond the so-called wildland urban interface and take a restoration bent were included in the measure.

To the dismay of environmentalists, the bill sweeps away a NEPA requirement that the Forest Service analyze all the environmental impacts of logging projects aimed at reducing wildfire threat and insect infestation or promoting forest health restoration.

The McInnis bill says the Forest Service can move ahead on projects without considering any other alternatives, including taking "no action" at all on a proposal. The bill blocks anyone from filing an administrative appeal with the Forest Service to block a thinning project covered by the legislation.

The bill makes it harder for citizens or environmental groups to file lawsuits by requiring them to file within two weeks of a project's approval. The bill requires judges to expedite all thinning appeals cases and rule on them within two months.

TRUST, COVINGTON PRIME MOVERS

The Trust and Covington's ERI are the prime movers behind forest restoration in northern Arizona by virtue of their scientific expertise, political connections and ability to work with politicians, ranging from conservative Republican U.S. Sen. Jon Kyl to Democrat Gov. Janet Napolitano.

Without the backing of the Trust and Covington, it's hard to imagine how forest thinning and restoration projects in the Flagstaff-area could have gotten off the ground.

For example, the Trust was instrumental in establishing the Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership, while ERI brought in millions of federal dollars for local thinning projects and research.

When the McInnis bill passed, the Trust, which usually automatically supports forest health logging, unlike groups such as the Sierra Club and Flagstaff-based Southwest Forest Alliance, exploded in outrage.

The McInnis bill is "politically motivated and counterproductive to the goals of forest restoration and community protection," said a Trust news release.

"Despite right-wing enthusiasm, there's still no evidence that gutting environmental laws will make us safer from fire, "said Taylor McKinnon, Grand Canyon Trust Program Officer, "The Healthy Forests legislation is based on unsubstantiated assertions and anecdotal information."

Bill Hedden, newly appointed executive director of the Trust, added: "We've been working hand in hand with the Forest Service against the clock to restore these forests and protect our communities from wildfires. We protest this dishonest bill that cuts the public out of forest management decisions and hides industrial logging of big trees behind a beauty screen of thinning projects. It will just snarl needed forest treatments in the courts."

Covington said in an interview Friday that he supports the McInnis bill, though he would have preferred that it go beyond the 20 million acres around communities and call for thinning and restoration deep into national forests.

For example, Covington said thinning in the deep forest eight miles from Flagstaff is needed to prevent a catastrophic wildfire from reaching the city and ravaging ecosystems.

"While I understand the focus on the urban interface, mostly on communities at risk, I still think it's short-sighted. I've said in my testimony repeatedly is we want to protect

human lives and houses, but we don't want to ignore the health of the landscape," said Covington.

He added: "You can rebuild a house in a year, but you can't rebuild a spotted owl nest site in hundreds of years. An eroded watershed like those on the Rodeo-Chediski Fire will take thousands of years to recover. So I'm disappointed it doesn't have a broader focus than that. I understand politically why that's the case."

Covington said however the major reason he's supporting the McInnis bill is because for the first time, a major piece of federal forest legislation talks about "forest restoration."

"My battle for a long time has been that beyond the need to prevent fire danger, it's time to take a restoration focus instead of just a fuel reduction focus. Instead of piece-meal solutions, treating symptoms, I've been trying to get everybody to understand that this is a fundamental forest health crisis, it's not just that we have too much fuel and we're getting fires. It's also that we're getting bizarre ecosystem behavior," said Covington.

MCINNIS BILL DOOMED?

Trust officials maintain that the McInnis bill is doomed in the U.S. Senate because of its language eliminating appeals and discouraging lawsuits.

They also say it's hard to understand how Covington can support the bill, especially since recent ERI research proves that appeals and lawsuits from environmentalists and others have not played a significant role delaying or blocking forest thinning projects.

ERI found there was little or no data to support claims by politicians that environmental groups had filed the bulk of appeals and lawsuits challenging forest health logging projects. ERI added that politicians had successfully "demonized" conservationists during last year's disastrous western fire season by saying they delayed fuels reduction projects.

Two weeks ago ERI's conclusions were bolstered by a General Accounting Office report found that during FY 2001 and 2002 only 24 percent of fuels reduction projects were appealed, and 79 percent of these were processed within 90 days.

In contrast, only 3 percent of fuels reduction projects were litigated, but 43 percent of these were still in court at the time of the GAO survey.

Gary Ghioto can be reached at 556-2253 or gghioto@azdailysun.co