

Daschle Quietly Advocates Logging

July 26, 2002

by Dennis T. Avery, Dennis T. Avery

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle is worried that the forests of the Black Hills in his home state of South Dakota will go up in smoke this dry summer. He wants the forests thinned, to reduce the fuel for big fires. He wants logging—and he wants it fast.

That's why Sen.. Daschle quietly inserted into the Defense Appropriation bill a provision that, "due to extraordinary circumstances," would exempt timber activities in South Dakota from the National Forest Management Act and National Environmental Policy Act; would not subject them to the usual provisions for public notice, comment periods, or appeal requirements; and would not even subject them to judicial review by any U.S. courts.

More than 20 lawsuits, appeals, and reviews are currently blocking logging efforts to reduce forest fuel loads in the Black Hills. Some of the legal actions date back to 1985. Not surprisingly, most of the lawsuits were instituted by Daschle's political allies in the Green movement. "As we have seen in the last several weeks, the fire danger in the Black Hills is high, and we need to get crews on the ground as soon as possible to reduce this risk and protect property and lives," Daschle said in a statement July 22, after a House-Senate conference committee agreed on the Defense Appropriation language.

"What's good for the Black Hills should be good for every forest in the United States," said Sen.. Larry Craig (R-ID).

"After hearing all the hand-wringing from environmentalists downplaying the impact of appeals and litigation, it's nice to see that the highest-ranking Democrat in the nation agrees that these frivolous challenges have totally crippled forest managers," said Rep. Scott McInnis, (R-CO), chairman of the House subcommittee on forests and forest health.

Congressional Republicans said they would try to extend the logging permission to forests in their own states. They said Mr. Daschle should support them in their

efforts to reduce fuel loads broadly across the nation's forests. More than 50,000 fires have burned more than 3.7 million acres of public forest this summer, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

Sen. Daschle is caught between his home-state constituents, who fear their forests will go up in huge blazes without logging, and his national political allies among the eco-groups, who oppose logging in virtually any form.

The environmental movement for decades has demonized logging as the rape of forests. Several eco-groups including the Sierra Club recently wrote to President Bush demanding an end to all logging on public lands.

Yet America already has sharply cut logging of public lands. Even salvage logging to take out trees felled in large numbers by pest epidemics and windstorms is no longer being allowed. Thus the country has more trees and more forest fire potential than at any time since the nineteenth century.

Most Americans today are only dimly aware that fire is the natural fate of most forests. Early photos of the Pacific Northwest show a sea of grass with a few islands of trees instead of a sea of old-growth forest. That's because natural fires periodically "harvested" the region's forests.

The American Indians—considered demigods by many of today's environmentalists—burned forests extensively, in part to clear underbrush and improve the hunting, but also to prevent the mega-fires that could have swept over their villages.

U.S. Rep. J. C. Hayworth (R-AZ), who watched helplessly as summer fires raged through more than a half-million acres of the Grand Canyon State, accuses Daschle of engaging in blatant political hypocrisy by seeking a stealth exemption for South Dakota.

"We're trying to rebound from the worst fires in our history where hundreds of homes became ashes and thousands of lives were shattered," Hayworth said. "We're still on emergency footing in the White Mountains of Arizona . . . Believe me, if we'd had the option (to thin our forests), you better believe we would have."

Environmentalists may want to join Hayworth—and Smokey Bear—in presenting Daschle with a Congressional Utter Hypocrisy Award for 2002.