

Take a fresh look at the farm bill

December 5, 2007 *San Francisco Chronicle*

Editor –

The Farm Bill also matters to wildlife.

The bill contains programs intended for soil protection, such as the powerful Conservation Reserve Program, which has converted over 4.5 million acres of erodible cropland to undisturbed grassy cover inhabited by songbirds, waterfowl, deer, hawks and other wildlife.

The bill remains dominated by subsidies for grotesque overproduction of commodity crops - few of which, ironically, are fit for direct human consumption; instead, they're fed to animals on feed lots or ultra-processed into food additives. Reducing or eliminating those subsidies would free budget space to enhance the conservation programs while reducing the bill's overall price tag. A shift in spending could also benefit nutritional programs and "specialty crops" grown in California such as fruits, nuts, and vegetables (which are special in the sense that we can actually eat them).

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Feinstein, Boxer need to take a stand on 2007 Farm Bill

November 29, 2007 *The Eureka Reporter*

Dear editor,

The Senate is currently considering the 2007 Farm Bill, and neither Feinstein nor Boxer has yet revealed publicly where she stands. For those interested in reforming American food policy, the new bill shows promise, but it continues to deliver huge subsidies for grotesque overproduction of major commodity "crops" (few of which, ironically, are fit for direct human consumption, instead they're fed to animals confined on feed lots or ultra-processed into food additives). The new bill does offer some tasty dishes: it enhances funding for conservation and nutrition programs, and California farmers will benefit from provisions for "specialty crops" such as fruits, nuts, and vegetables (which are special in the sense that we can actually eat them). The bill also contains small gestures encouraging organic production, farmers markets, and grass-fed livestock – all important industries here in Humboldt County. However, those measures amount to little more than sugar intended to sweeten the bitter taste of massive payments to big, unsustainable agribusiness. It is imperative that the US redirects its agricultural policy to encourage more sustainable and nutritious food production by abandoning our out-dated payments for corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton, and rice. Subsidies only favor the current broken system. Simply yanking subsidies away from these farmers is of course unfair (and would ironically increase production still further as farmers could only stay afloat by growing more of the stuff), so I am in favor of the FRESH Act offered by Senators Richard Lugar, R-Ind., and Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., which offers insurance against price drops for commodity crop producers. Call or email senators Feinstein and Boxer to ask them to vote against the bill if it fails to offer a well-balanced agricultural policy.

Matt Johnson, Eureka

Lesson: Fox and hen house.
May 2007, *The Times Standard*

The fox was guarding the hen house. The deputy assistant Secretary of Interior charged with overseeing the Endangered Species Act, Julie MacDonald, resigned last week after accusations of overruling agency scientists, leaking documents to private industry lobbyists, and altering recommendations for safeguarding federally endangered species.

I teach wildlife habitat management courses at Humboldt State, where students learn that U.S. law protects animals by outlawing the destruction of habitats deemed critical for their survival. Therefore, biologists' obligation to society and wild species is to rigorously identify precisely which habitats need protection. If too much habitat is identified as critical, private industry may be unnecessarily constrained, too little and a species may perish.

So I understand my students' frustration when they learn that the best available scientific information is sometimes ignored, suppressed, or even manipulated by the very department charged with preserving endangered species!

But the fox was caught. Truth prevailed; she's gone, and now we face the challenge of opportunity. I tell my students that, as biologists, our challenge is to study endangered species with rigor and objectivity, to translate that knowledge into cogent recommendations. Society's challenge is to put someone with integrity in MacDonald's place, someone who will honor the needs of endangered species and respect the capacity for people to study them.

Matt Johnson
7 May 2007

Back to School for the National Marine Fisheries Service March 2005, *The Times Standard*

On Tuesday the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) proposed an 80% reduction in designated critical habitat for endangered Pacific salmon and steelhead, a story recently picked up by the Associated Press (but not yet by the Times-Standard). Brian Gorman, a spokesperson for the NMFS, defended this by stating, "The real teeth of the ESA (Endangered Species Act) comes from the listing itself, not the critical habitat." He's flat wrong.

The Endangered Species Preservation Act was passed in 1966, but it offered little protection until 1973, when it was amended to require the designation and protection of critical habitat – defined as areas "essential to the conservation of the species." This clause is the real teeth of the ESA because habitat alteration is a cause of endangerment for 88% of all imperiled species in the U.S. Habitat protection is paramount, and society is counting on employees of natural resource agencies like the NMFS to know this and make decisions accordingly. Maybe it's time for some of them to go back to school; we have openings at Humboldt State this spring.

¹ See "History of the ESA" from US Fish & Wildlife Service
(<http://endangered.fws.gov/esasum.html>)

² See "Rebuilding the Ark" by Wilcove et al. 1996, Environmental Defense Fund
(http://www.environmentaldefense.org/documents/483_Rebuilding%20the%20Ark.htm)

Sweat the small stuff.

13 December 2004, in *The Times Standard*

The recently passed Healthy Forests Restoration Act supposedly will help the U.S. Forest Service be a better steward of western forests that are suffering from over 50 years of fire suppression. Specifically, it is meant to allow logging that will help reduce the likelihood of tragic fires (via “forest thinning”) and help remove dead trees after inevitable wildfire and insect outbreaks, thereby reducing future fire-risk (via “salvage & sanitation logging”). Some environmentalists claim it will be used to fast-track logging forests without reducing fire hazard.

Who is right will depend on a detail of the Act’s implementation – a *small* detail.

Thinning and salvage logging will only work to curb fire-risk if small trees are cut and removed from overly thick forests. Fires become uncontrollable when they reach into the forest canopy by climbing sequentially from woody debris on the forest floor, to brush, to short trees, and then into the canopy of mature trees, where they can become powerful enough to keep armies of skilled and courageous firefighters at bay. These so-called “fuel ladders” of offending brush and small trees were historically swept away from many forests in the west by frequent, low-intensity fires. Big trees aren’t dangerous; they generally survive fires in the absence of small trees. Cutting trees of all sizes will only open the forests up to more light, encouraging brush and small trees, which will perpetuate the problem. Moreover, large trees, snags, and logs provide the most important ecological benefits in terms of wildlife habitat and nutrient cycling. Their retention is crucial for forest health – the purported goal of the Act.

Despite the compelling reasons to remove small but retain large trees, the Act places vague constraints on the size (and age) of trees thinned. The details of the Act’s wording are loose enough that its potential implementation ranges from responsible forest stewardship to forest degradation. This range only underscores the imperative of various watch-dog groups and industry lobbyists to keep a careful eye on the Forest Service and complain loudly when their interests are at stake – a process that has previously paralyzed the Forest Service. Ironically, paralyzing legal battles were in part the impetus for the Act, which shortens the period for public comments on its projects.

Carefully reviewing projects to ensure they retain trees appropriately sized and spaced will be challenging because a hallmark of western forests is that no two are alike – a tree whose trunk is 1 foot in diameter is large in some lodgepole pine forests, but small in a ponderosa pine forest, and nearly a runt in a giant sequoia forest. Deepening the difficulty in drafting a sweeping act to set policy for diverse forests is the fact that “catastrophic” fires are the norm for some forest types. Fires in forests characterized by rare but intense natural fires create snags and young forest that are critical to some plants and animals. Here, forest health relies in part on huge tree-killing fires.

In the end, the Act could be very beneficial – as long as the Forest Service is nimble enough to vary how it implements the Act among various forest types and regions. Wise use of the Act could improve forest health by removing small trees and debris from forests characterized by frequent low-intensity natural fires. Irresponsible use of the Act could lead to the oxymoronic practice of removing healthy big trees under the pretense of enhancing forest health. The Forest Service was founded on Gifford Pinchot’s principle of wise use. Time will prove whether it has wisdom to sweat the small stuff.

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