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Committee OKs Labrador's land bill

By William L. Spence, Lewiston Tribune, Idaho (TNS)

WASHINGTON - The House Natural Resources Committee approved Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador's public lands bill on a 25-13 party-line vote Wednesday.

The Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act would allow states to select as many as 4 million acres of national forest lands - about 2 percent of total U.S. Forest Service ownership - for locally managed forest demonstration projects.

Revenues from timber harvests or other activities would pay for project operating costs; Labrador also submitted an amendment Wednesday to clarify that any profits would be split between the U.S. treasury and counties where the projects are located, with counties receiving 75 percent and the federal government getting the remainder.

Each state could select a minimum of 200,000 acres for a pilot project; states that have at least 5 million acres of national forest land could select as many as 900,000 acres. An advisory committee appointed by the governor would be responsible for picking the land; wilderness areas and national monuments would be exempt from selection.

The amended bill also requires the advisory committee to develop a management plan for each project, provides for a 60-day public comment period and requires regular assessments of the effect on forest health.

Labrador noted the amendments are intended to address concerns raised by Democrats and by the U.S. Forest Service, which initially opposed the measure. However, Arizona Rep. Raul Grijalva, the ranking Democrat on the committee, said they didn't go far enough.

"I take issue with the way this whitewashes public input," he said. "There's no requirement that the advisory board consider alternative actions, there's no verification that they considered and responded to the public comments. This

amendment is pure window dressing that doesn't lead to meaningful public input."

Grijalva also noted the advisory board would be responsible for doing the assessments, suggesting their analysis might be biased, and he objected to the fact the federal government would still be responsible for any wildfire costs on selected lands.

Rep. Raul Ruiz, D-Calif., raised a concern about American Indian ancestral lands. Tribes have lost control of many of these lands through various means, he said, and Labrador's bill could exacerbate that problem.

"This bill not only shortchanges the American people by giving public lands away to mining and logging interests, it does so by trampling on Native American rights," Ruiz said.

He proposed an amendment that would preclude states from selecting lands adjacent to Indian reservations or that have any historical or cultural significance to a tribe.

Labrador noted his bill already includes language requiring public access be maintained, along with any tribal rights. After he agreed to work with Ruiz on additional language to address his concerns, Ruiz withdrew his amendment.

Labrador began working on the legislation in 2011 at the request of several county commissioners in his district.

Earlier this year, Valley County Commissioner Gordon Cruickshank testified in favor of the bill, telling the House committee it would give local communities greater control over their futures.

"When the national forest system was created, the federal government sold the idea of public ownership by promising a steady supply of resources for economic stability," he said. "Current forest management practices are not fulfilling that promise."

This legislation previously passed the House in 2013, but was not considered in the Senate. There's no guarantee the current measure will even come up for a vote on the House floor, but it could be considered as a standalone bill or be included in a larger package, as happened in 2013.

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