

## Trump's wildfire plan eases environmental law to speed forest thinning in California

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WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is proposing new regulations it argues could help prevent wildfires — but could also open up more federal land to logging and mineral exploration.

The [U.S. Forest Service released proposed regulatory changes](#) Wednesday that would exempt several new types of forest management projects from the typical review process under the National Environmental Policy Act or NEPA.

The changes are part of an ongoing push by the Trump administration to speed forest management projects — things like clearing brush, removing dead trees and thinning smaller trees from overgrown forests.

[Over half of California's forests](#) are on federal land. Due to a combination of factors, they are now choked with dead trees and brush, which have made them dangerously prone to the kind of catastrophic wildfires the state has endured over the past two years. Scientists warn California is at risk of a [similarly dangerous fire season in 2019](#).

“We are committed to doing the work to protect people and infrastructure from catastrophic wildfire,” Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said in a statement. “With millions of acres in need of treatment, years of costly analysis and delays are not an acceptable solution — especially when data and experience show us we can get this work done with strong environmental protection standards as well as protect communities, livelihoods and resources.” The Forest Service is an agency within the Department of Agriculture.

The Forest Service is proposing to exempt certain forest restoration projects, road and trail management, administrative and recreation site management, and special use authorizations from environmental impact reviews.

Examples of the types of projects that would qualify, according to the Forest Service proposal: clearing roadside brush; repair and maintenance of recreation sites; clearing forests for utility or telecommunications equipment; and thinning and brush control work to reduce fire hazards.

Other potentially exempted projects would be more controversial, such as authorizing short-term mineral or energy exploration and commercial timber harvests, which would be limited to areas less than 4,200 acres.

The Forest Service notes in its proposal that “the agency has a backlog of more than 5,000 applications for new special use permits and renewals of existing special use permits that are awaiting environmental analysis and decision.” Meanwhile, “Over 80 million acres of National

Forest System (NFS) land are in need of restoration to reduce the risk of wildfire, insect epidemics, and forest diseases.”

“Increasing the efficiency of environmental analysis would enable the agency to do more to increase the health and productivity of our national forests and grasslands,” it argues.

Some forestry experts were open to the proposal. “We have guarded optimism that this type of ‘streamlining’ could be used to increase the pace and scale of ecologically appropriate projects,” said Ed Smith, an ecologist with The Nature Conservancy who works in the Sierra Nevada mountains. “But of course there is always a risk that it could be abused,” Smith cautioned.

Other environmental advocates warned that exempting these types of projects from the standard environmental review would limit the public’s ability to weigh in on their merits, before the work begins.

“The Trump administration is trying to stifle the public’s voice and hide environmental damage to public lands,” said Ted Zukoski, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. “Logging companies could bulldoze hundreds of miles of new roads and chainsaw miles of national forests while ignoring the damage to wildlife and waterways. All of this would happen without involving nearby communities or forest visitors.”

The move by the Trump administration comes after other efforts to loosen forest management regulations fell flat in Congress last year.

Lawmakers passed the Farm Bill in December without any of environmental exemptions for logging projects that the president and leading cabinet secretaries had sought Shortly afterward, Trump signed an executive order calling for more active forest management on federal land, including expanding logging, as part of a plan to reduce wildfire risks.

The president has continued to blame California for the rising toll of wildfires in the state, suggesting more aggressive forest management would solve the problem.

“Billions of dollars are sent to the State of California for Forest fires that, with proper Forest Management, would never happen,” Trump tweeted in January. “Unless they get their act together, which is unlikely, I have ordered FEMA to send no more money. It is a disgraceful situation in lives & money!”