

May 4, 1979

TESTIMONY OF CONGRESSMAN LES AuCOIN
before the
APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE FOR INTERIOR
AND RELATED AGENCIES

Mr. Chairman. Thank you for making this time available this afternoon. I want to make the case on behalf of an increase in the recommended budget for the Forest Service, particularly for its reforestation and timber stand improvement programs. I believe that the proposed budget level is woefully inadequate and totally unacceptable as a serious recommendation. A 30 per cent increase--around \$28 million--for this one program is, in my view, reasonable and achievable.

But first, I want to make some brief observations about the state of housing in this country. I chair the Congressional Task Force on Home Ownership, which bears the responsibility of investigating the ever-increasing high cost and related problems confronting the American family in buying a home today.

Over the last 10 years, we have seen the price of an average house rise by almost 125 per cent. And now we face the very real possibility that this house will cost more than \$90,000 by 1990. These are dramatic figures that mean for the American family that it simply will not be able to afford to buy a home.

During the hearings that my Task Force held around the country on this problem, we identified several reasons why home costs are soaring beyond the national average inflation rate. One in particular stands out: the poor management of our timber base.

But what has all of this to do with the budget for the Forest Service? Simply that we cannot expect the management of the timber base to improve--and reduce the inflationary impact that timber supply has on housing--until we give the Forest Service the resources it needs to do its job. And we must begin with reforestation.

Figures from the Administration indicate that nationally, there is a backlog of 2.1 million acres in need of reforestation. These are not idle acres that might produce a few trees. Fully 85 per cent of these acres--1.8 million--are valuable, productive timberland and can be economically replanted.

Incidentally, my state of Oregon holds about a sixth of this backlog, of which 75 per cent is economically productive timberland.

Unfortunately, Mr. Chairman, these are not acres that we can throw some money at when we start to feel the pinch for timber and expect them to grow trees overnight. In plain truth: trees don't grow overnight. From planting to harvest, the average Douglas fir takes from 30 to 40 years to grow to maturity before it can be cut. This truth, however, has been lost on the Office of Management and Budget.

In its haste to slash the budget, OMB has adopted a short-sighted and irresponsible strategy, forgetting that replanting trees is not just an expenditure, it is an investment. Reforestation is an investment that will pay dividends to taxpayers, stimulate productivity and hold down inflation.

Of course the reforestation budget also includes funds for timber stand improvement, and activity that is vitally important if the investment is indeed to give us the return we expect.

Recently, the Environmental Protection Agency issued an emergency suspension of the herbicide 2,4,5-T and began cancellation proceedings against it.

Regardless of how one views this action, we cannot deny that it will have a severe impact on the timber stand improvement activities of the Forest Service, which uses it widely in our forest lands to promote the growth of young trees.

For the current fiscal year, the Forest Service reports there are 50,000 acres ready for site preparation and release treatment with 2,4,5-T. Should the ban remain in effect, roughly 20,000 of these acres will have to be deferred and go untreated. The balance, of course, would be treated in other, more costly ways.

The deferral of treatment for this acreage translates into an 11 per cent decline in growth during the rotation cycle if there is no change in current funding levels.

This is the impact of the withdrawal of this herbicide in just one year; I don't think I need to point out to the Committee how this decrease in productivity will compound itself year after year. Clearly, without a corresponding increase in funds for timber stand improvement to compensate for the loss of this chemical, we face a serious productivity crisis in the years ahead.

Finally, I would like to make one final point. The Resources Planning Act sets forth certain spending targets needed to meet our goals of a plentiful timber supply for the forest products and homebuilding industries. These targets are based on the best, realistic information that we can muster about our natural resources.

The amount recommended for reforestation and timber stand improvement--\$92.9 million--is but 41 per cent of the goal set for Fiscal Year 1980 by the RPA process--less than half of what is needed to stay on track to meet our timber needs tomorrow. While fully funding the RPA goal may not be realistic, I believe that we can come a little closer to at least keep the Forest Service moving in the right direction, if not on the exact trail set out for it.

I commend the President and the OMB for holding down our federal deficit and for producing a budget that clearly meets some important tests for our current fight against inflation and excessive spending. However, I believe the cuts in the Forest Service funds are imprudent and unwise. We will pay a high price for them--and for trees--tomorrow.

For these reasons, Mr. Chairman, I urge the Committee to review these cuts carefully and to restore a more reasonable level of support.