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The Watershed Protection and Forest Recovery Act

U.S. Senators Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) and Mitt Romney (R-Utah)

U.S. Representatives Joe Neguse (D-Colo.), Celeste Maloy (R-Utah), Yadira Caraveo (D-Colo.), and John Curtis (R-Utah)

The Watershed Protection and Forest Recovery Act would create a new Emergency Forest Watershed Program at the US Department of Agriculture dedicated to watershed recovery on U.S. Forest Service (USFS) lands. This new program will streamline funding to restore natural resources on National Forest System Land and protect life, private property, and water resources downstream of federal forests.

During recent major wildfire recovery efforts in the West, including the East Troublesome and Cameron Peak fires in Colorado, water providers sought to protect their drinking water supply with the existing Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)-administered Emergency Watershed Program (EWP). Water providers encountered major obstacles using this program because EWP was designed for recovery of non-federal lands. Programs designed for the recovery of Federal lands, such as the Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) Program, focus on the protection of Federal assets, leaving drinking water supplies at risk.

These recent experiences demonstrated the critical need for a program focused on the recovery of USFS lands, but benefiting downstream private property and water resources. The Watershed Protection and Forest Recovery Act is designed to fill this gap.

Specifically the bill would:

- Create a dedicated funding source, the Emergency Forest Watershed Program, for the protection of downstream private property and water resources following natural disasters USFS lands;
- Authorize watershed recovery protection measures following a natural disaster that has caused a sudden impairment to natural resources on National Forest System land.
 - Measures include work necessary to address runoff retardation, soil-erosion prevention, and flood mitigation;
- Allow Tribes, States, local governments, water utilities, water districts, water conservation districts and special districts to enter into agreements with USFS to implement watershed recovery protection measures;
- Speed up project timelines by minimizing environmental reviews and requiring project sponsors to complete recovery work within two years after the conclusion of a natural disaster;
- Provide liability protection to the project sponsors; and
- Fully fund projects on federal lands, waiving matching requirements of the project sponsors.