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# Vilsack Hopes to Grow New Climate Awareness in Forest Service

By Jessica Leber

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The neglected child of climate policy at the Department of Agriculture took center stage on Friday as Secretary Tom Vilsack announced far-reaching changes to U.S. Forest Service goals.

Restoration goals should steer the management of the nation's forests, Vilsack said in a speech delivered in Seattle. The aim could shift a century of emphasis on timber production at the service, a woefully budget-stressed USDA division that manages a land area about the size of Texas.

"It is time for a change in the way we view and manage America's forestlands with an eye towards the future," said Vilsack. Climate change is a major part of that future, in Vilsack's view.

"Our shared vision begins with restoration. Restoration means managing forestlands first and foremost to protect our water resources, while making our forests more resilient to climate change," he continued.

He also noted that wildfires, disease and pests -- all threats that may be exacerbated by climate change -- have led to declining forest health in recent decades and have affected local economies, wildlife and natural and recreation resources.

Both environmentalists and the timber industry saw the importance of the shift. "Many secretaries have acknowledged the multiple resources of the forest system, but none of them have made the restoration of it the primary goal. And that is what is key here," said Laurie Wayburn, president of Pacific Forest Trust, a conservation group.

## Applause from the timber industry

The timber industry also looked for the positives in the speech. "He's clearly interested and concerned about the health of our nation's forests, and that's a good thing," said Ann Forest Burns, vice president of the American Forest Resource Council, adding that this level of "direct" interest from a secretary was unprecedented.

The speech was the first in decades by an agriculture secretary that was focused solely on forest policy, observed Mike Anderson, a senior resources analyst with the Wilderness Society. USDA heads have historically paid scant attention to the agency ever since it was transferred to the department from the Interior Department in 1905.

In recent years, catastrophic wildfires have come to engulf about half of the agency's budget, cannibalizing other program funds. The result has been withering employee morale and diminishing capacity to do restoration and fire prevention work.

Vilsack will have ample opportunity to implement his vision. He announced that he will direct his new Forest Service director, longtime employee Tom Tidwell, to craft a new forest management plan to replace 2005 and 2008 Bush administration regulations. Both were struck down by the courts, and the Obama administration will not appeal those decisions, Vilsack said.

The administration also has been working with Congress to make available contingency funds to fight wildfires without shrinking the rest of the agency's budget. And last week, it also announced it would fight a court ruling that threw out a 2001 rule that protected undeveloped forest areas.

Anderson said that as climate change brings more intense storms, reducing the size of the Forest Service's road system will be important for protecting drinking water quality. More than half of the nation's total water supply originates on public and private forestlands, according to USDA.

### **Hoping to end a 'history of distrust' and litigation**

Vilsack further imagined an end to the long "history of distrust" and lengthy court battles that have all but paralyzed timber harvests and forest-thinning programs in some forests of the West. He also called for the agency to engage with the private sector through an "all lands approach" to prevent fragmentation and development, which he said could consume more than 40 million acres of private forests in coming decades.

Key to both of those goals may be aiding the struggling timber industry. As the housing market and demand for lumber have plunged, sawmills around the country have closed or laid off hundreds of workers. Some of those mills help fund restoration and fire programs by sending small logs and thinned wood to commercial markets.

That Vilsack "appears to recognize that logging and milling infrastructure are needed to get this forest restoration work done" is a hopeful sign, Burns said. But it will be important to "disenfranchise" the litigious margins on both sides of the debate, she said, so that "people of good will" can find a way forward.

For his part, Vilsack highlighted the emerging markets for carbon, bioenergy and water, alongside traditional lumber markets, as the path to maintaining forest economies.

### **Some distrust lingers**

Burns expressed concern, however. "Sometimes existing jobs get ignored as we're making new jobs. We'd like to see a balance of investment," she said.

Doc Hastings (R-Wash.), ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee, was even more skeptical about Vilsack's plan.

"Our economy can't afford a vision that is blind to timber jobs and timber communities," he said in a statement. "We must also be honest about why many forests are in the poor health they are today, and it's not climate change, but rather lawsuits and policies that shutdown active, environmentally-beneficial management of forests that protect trees' health and prevent forest fires."

Some environmental groups, however, said the speech could really mark the beginning of a new era. Anderson of the Wilderness Society said forest restoration is an activity about which there's typically a lot of agreement among interest groups, including loggers, conservationists and Indian tribes.

But trouble could still brew. There will be tension, Wayburn said, in facilitating new markets that support forest restoration projects and healthy forests rather than overtaking those goals.

"Of course, the timber industry has a very different view of what restoration means ... they kind of say, 'The fewer trees around, the better,'" noted Anderson.