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Conservation, timber groups push for domestic easements in Senate bill

By Allison Winter, E&E reporter

A coalition of 50 conservation and forestry groups is putting the pressure on the Senate to include a program in the climate bill that could help stem the loss of domestic forest, farm and ranchlands.

The groups, who sent representatives to Capitol Hill this week to plea their case with Senate aides, want the climate bill to include incentives for domestic conservation easements that did not make it into the cap-and-trade proposal that passed the House in June.

That legislation, H.R. 2454, included set-asides to help prevent international deforestation and conversion, where developing nations have few of their own programs to address the stark losses.

But American forestry and conservation groups are making the case for the legislation to include equal conservation incentives at home.

"This provides such a critical missing piece of the picture, a missing piece from the climate perspective and the economic perspective," said Laurie Wayburn, president of the California-based Pacific Forest Trust. "This is a very tangible, implementable part of the solution."

The United States loses more than 2.2 million acres of forest, farm and ranchland each year to conversion and development, according to estimates from the Agriculture Department. USDA has predicted that the country could lose up to 75 million acres of forests in the next 50 years.

The coalition -- which also includes Land Trust Alliance, National Association of State Foresters, a dozen state land trust groups and carbon market groups such as CantorCO2e -- wants the climate bill to include a special fund for domestic conservation easements.

The easements would protect lands for continued use as farms or parks and provide financial assistance to farmers and landowners who are struggling to make a profit.

If included in the bill, the fund would set aside some of the emissions allowances from the imposed carbon market for domestic conservation easements. The provision would increase funding for already existing easement programs, such as the USDA's Farm and Ranchlands Protection Program.

The plea from the forest and land trust coalition is part of a mounting list of requests for the Senate climate bill. As groups have had more time to comb through the House-passed legislation, many that supported the bill have formed new coalitions to make new requests of the Senate. The forest and land trust coalition made no similar lobbying push in the House.

Wayburn and other representatives from the groups met with aides for members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee this week, and the coalition sent a letter yesterday to the chairmen of the EPW, Agriculture and Finance committees. Wayburn said lawmakers have been very responsive to the requests from the coalition.

"This helps provide a really critical answer for all of them and it brings people together around a sweet spot," Wayburn said. "We can't fight over land if we don't have land."

Forestry groups have been making a concerted push to have their concerns heard in the Senate bill, with a flurry of letters and meetings with lawmakers and testimony before the Agriculture and EPW panels to help make their case.

They have several advocates on key committees. Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.), the new chairwoman of the Agriculture Committee, opposes the effort to advance cap-and-trade legislation this year but has said if there is a bill, she wants to make sure it has a robust title for farms and forests.

And Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) has said she wants to ensure the proposal has specific set-asides for forestry that the House cap-and-trade bill lacks.

Stabenow, a member of the Finance and Agriculture committees, is helping to draft an agriculture and forestry package that she hopes to include in the bill this year. When asked about the status of the offset title earlier this week, Stabenow said that work on the health care package is currently overshadowing it.