

## **Tester more upbeat than ever on fate of forest bill**

**Momentum | Senator says subcommittee may act on measure as early as this fall**

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**U.S. Sen. Jon Tester's long-stalled forest bill, which would newly designate acreage for both wilderness and logging in three Montana forests, could be finding some new momentum, the senator and bill supporters say.**

**"I feel better now about its position than I ever have in the past, and significantly better," Tester, a Democrat, said in an interview late last week.**

**He said there's a growing understanding in Congress not only about his bill, but also that something needs to be done to improve forest management in the West.**

**Tester and the bill's supporters, which include timber-mill owners, wilderness advocates and scores of recreation businesses, also are hoping a new player in the political mix — Republican Congressman Steve Daines — might provide a bipartisan push that's been missing.**

**In past weeks, Daines' staff has met with both supporters and opponents of the Tester bill, and Daines himself has been talking often with Tester about the measure.**

**Yet while Daines said he and Tester appear to share a common goal of "finding ways to unlock the gridlock we have today on increasing timber harvests in our national forest," Daines has yet to sign on to the bill.**

**"We're working well together and we share some common goals," he said in an interview. "I think there are ways to take what Jon has and make some improvements on it, to make it more beneficial for Montana and the timber industry and jobs."**

**Daines also is co-sponsoring a House bill that mandates far more logging, on all forests nationwide, and makes it harder to legally challenge a timber sale — a measure strongly opposed by conservationists and most Democrats.**

**Tester's bill, the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act, was first introduced in 2009. It designates at least 100,000 acres of national forestland for logging on three Montana forests while also creating 667,000 acres of new wilderness.**

**The Tester bill also takes 370,000 acres of wilderness study areas and designates them as recreation areas, which can be used by snowmobilers, other motorized vehicles and horsemen and women.**

**The acreage is mostly on three national forests: The Kootenai in northwestern Montana, the Beaverhead-Deerlodge in southwestern Montana and the Lolo in west-central Montana.**

**A coalition of timber-industry people and conservationists worked on the measure for years, crafting a compromise that could provide more timber to Montana's dwindling number of mills, create new wilderness and free up other areas for motorized recreation.**

**"We never envisioned 100 percent support for this bill, but it's pretty damn high, and it's that way because folks on the ground helped craft this bill," Tester said.**

**Yet the bill has never even passed out of a Senate committee. Four weeks ago, a Senate subcommittee held a hearing on the bill, and Tester said it's possible the subcommittee could act on the measure this fall.**

**The bill is not without its vocal opponents in Montana. Some environmentalists say it gives away too much to timber interests, while groups opposing wilderness say it locks up too much land and does not guarantee timber will be cut on lands designated for logging.**

**Wilderness advocates "are not really giving anything up" in the bill, says state Rep. Kerry White, R-Bozeman, a board member for Citizens for Balanced Use. "It's just additional lands locked away from the majority of the American public."**

**Montana's former U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg, a Republican defeated by Tester in the 2012 Senate race, also was a staunch opponent of the bill while he was in Congress.**

**Daines, however, has said he'd like to work more closely with Montana's two Democratic U.S. senators, and, upon getting elected, specifically mentioned the Tester bill.**

**Last week, Daines said he thinks the Tester bill doesn't do enough to enable logging on Montana forests. It targets only three forests for logging and has a 15-year sunset on those provisions, he noted.**

**"I'm not comfortable that we have the right balance on the timber side," Daines said. "We have virtually shut down the timber industry on national forest land in Montana."**

**During the past three decades, timber harvesting on Montana's national forests peaked in 1987 at 624 million board feet of timber in 1987. Last year, it was a mere 40 million board feet, while the average for the past five years was 95 million board feet.**

**Tester said Daines has been mostly positive about the bill and kept an open mind, "and I really appreciate that."**

**However, he said his bill is meant as a pilot project to break a decadeslong stalemate over resource management on Montana forests, and if it works, perhaps it can be expanded.**

**"You've got to walk before you run," he said. "We're cutting 100,000 acres of timber. ... Let's see how it works, and then go from there."**

**For timber folks supporting the Tester bill, taking a chance on logging more acreage in a few forests is far better than the status quo, which they see as a**

**virtual stalemate with few timber sales going forward.**

**“What should we have on the Kootenai (National Forest)? Nothing, like we have right now?” asks Wayne Hirst, a Libby accountant who says many of his clients in the timber industry have left town to work elsewhere. “And the woods will just keep growing until they burn up?”**

**“Or, perhaps move ahead and have a chance to get some work done. It’s better to take a chance of moving forward.”**