

**STATEMENT OF CHRIS FRENCH
DEPUTY CHIEF, NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE**

**Before the
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS, FORESTS, AND MINING
Regarding
H.R.255 —BIG BEAR LAND EXCHANGE ACT**

September 16, 2020

Chairman Lee, Ranking Member Wyden, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to share the Administration's position on H.R. 255, the Big Bear Land Exchange Act, as passed by the House.

H.R. 255 would require that no later than one year after the date that the portion of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCT) is relocated and if San Bernardino County, California, offers to convey the non-Federal land to the United States, the Secretary shall exchange Federal land managed by the Forest Service for non-Federal land owned by the County for biomass utilization facilities, biomass recycling activities, and industrial resource recovery and recycling activities. The Act calls for the exchange of approximately 71 acres of non-federal land for 73 acres of federal land.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA or Department) supports the purpose of the Act to provide for biomass utilization facilities, biomass recycling, and industrial resource recovery and recycling activities. The removal of hazardous fuels from the San Bernardino National Forest continues to be a critical need to improve the health of the Forest and mitigate the effects of catastrophic fire. Having biomass utilization facilities in close proximity to the forest will reduce the overall costs of completing this work.

The Act requires that the land exchange shall be completed not later than one year after the required relocation of the segment of the PCT. While this land exchange would be a priority based on critical forest health needs, land exchanges under the best of circumstances take two or three years to complete. The Department would like to work with the bill sponsor to clarify the required completion date.

This bill provides for the relocation of a segment of the PCT. The Department wishes to work with the bill sponsors and Subcommittee to improve this provision. The PCT is governed by Public Law 90-543, as amended, so relocation will need to be consistent with this law. The trail is currently situated in the most optimal location based on the terrain. If relocation cannot be avoided, the Department would like to work with the bill sponsor and Subcommittee on language requiring that an appropriate study of the relocation be conducted within the requirements of current federal law and a formal Optimal Location Review be prepared by the Pacific Crest Trail Association and the Forest Service before any land exchange occurs. This process will ensure

that the PCT is moved to a location that continues or enhances the current trail experience and that the determination of the new route for the PCT is made in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other applicable laws. The bill should also require that the County pay for all processing costs associated with the exchange, including any the necessary location and environmental studies, and logistical planning and work to relocate the PCT.

Conclusion

Delivering dependable energy and providing jobs and economic benefits for rural communities while restoring ecosystems is a top priority of the USDA. The Department supports the goals of H.R. 255 and wishes to work with the sponsors and the Subcommittee to address the specific concerns noted in our testimony to accomplish our shared multiple use goals for National Forest System lands.

That concludes my testimony, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the Subcommittee members have for me.