



Legislative & Policy Update – December 2025

Published December 17, 2025

The [Council of Western State Foresters](#) (CWSF) Legislative & Policy Update provides information on issues of importance to CWSF. Policy and legislative updates are found on the [CWSF webpage](#). Please note that the items highlighted in these updates are only a selection of the issues CWSF and the Western Forestry Leadership Coalition (WFLC) are monitoring. Keep an eye out for our monthly newsletter, which provides summaries on other key legislative and programmatic issues. If you have not yet subscribed, you can do so [here](#). For more information, please contact [Neil Simpson](#), CWSF/WFLC Director of Policy.

This month's policy update covers:

- Natural Resources Conservation Service Launches Office of the Assistant Chiefs
- Brian Fennessy Named as the First Chief of the New U.S. Wildland Fire Service
- Wyoming State Forester Kelly Norris Testifies on Pending Wildfire Legislation
- Western Governors' Association Approves Five Policy Resolutions
- Congress Reauthorizes Secure Rural Schools
- Leaf Act Introduced to Give Preference to Local Contractors
- Responsible Wildland Fire Recovery Act Introduced in the House and Senate
- Fire Innovation Unit Act Introduced in the House and Senate
- Speed Act Introduced to Amend the National Environmental Policy Act
- Timber Production Expansion Guaranteed Loan Program Legislation Introduced

Natural Resources Conservation Service Launches Office of the Assistant Chiefs

On November 24, 2025, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service announced it is creating four new Offices of the Assistant Chief. The new office will replace the Office of the Regional Conservationists. According to the [press release](#), the new "structure reduces layers of bureaucracy while enhancing communication, consistency, and decision-making at the regional and state levels. Each Assistant Chief will oversee regional operations and work directly with State Conservationists to ensure consistent, science-based, and producer-driven program delivery."

Brian Fennessy Named as the First Chief of the New U.S. Wildland Fire Service

Homeland Security Today and other news outlets are reporting that Brian Fennessy has accepted the role of Director of the newly created U.S. Wildland Fire Service. In a [letter](#) to firefighters and professional staff, Fennessy announced he is leaving his role as Chief of the Orange County Fire Authority to become the Director of U.S. Wildland Fire Service. In the letter, he states that he has "tentatively accepted" the position and that he will begin the role on January 12, 2026, following a federal onboarding process.

Wyoming State Forester Kelly Norris Testifies on Pending Wildfire Legislation

On December 2, 2025, Wyoming State Forester Kelly Norris testified to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining. The subcommittee heard testimony

on twenty-six bills, with Norris's testimony focused on Senator John Barrasso's (R-WY) *Wildfire Prevention Act of 2025*.

[Watch the hearing here.](#)

Western Governors' Association Approves Five Policy Resolutions

At the recent Western Governors' Association [Winter Meeting](#) held in Scottsdale, Arizona, Western Governors approved five Policy Resolutions.

- [Policy Resolution 2026-01](#) calls on Congress to simplify and expedite federal-state land exchanges, sales, and conveyances.
- [Policy Resolution 2026-02](#) states, "the federal government must honor its...explicit statutory obligations to share royalty and lease payments with states and counties in the West to compensate them for the effects associated with federal land use and nontaxable lands within their borders."
- [Policy Resolution 2026-03](#) articulates the Governors' support for Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT), the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program, and efforts to ensure "full and predictable" SRS payments.
- [Policy Resolution 2026-04](#) recommends actions to improve federal housing programs.
- [Policy Resolution 2026-05](#) recognizes the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other federal agencies' role in disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Congress Reauthorizes Secure Rural Schools

Senators Mike Crapo (R-ID) and Ron Wyden (D-OR), and Representatives Doug LaMalfa (R-CA) and Joe Neguse (D-CO), led a bipartisan coalition of 89 lawmakers urging the House of Representatives to vote on and pass S. 356, the [Secure Rural Schools \(SRS\) and Self-Determination Act](#). The bill, which unanimously passed in the Senate in June of 2025, would reauthorize the program through Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 and provide lapsed payments for FYs 2024 and 2025.

The House of Representatives passed the bill by a vote of 395 to 5 on December 9, 2025, and it is expected to be signed by the President.

Read more from the [National Association of Counties](#).

Leaf Act Introduced to Give Preference to Local Contractors

Senators Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM) and Steve Daines (R-MT) introduced S. 3152, the [Local Employment Access for our Forests \(LEAF\) Act of 2025](#). The bill would amend the *Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003* to require the USDA Forest Service (Forest Service) to give local contractors preference when awarding vegetation management contracts. In a [press release](#), Lujan states the bill will "prioritize hiring trained, local experts – who know their communities the best – for wildfire mitigation projects and help ensure we keep recovery dollars in the communities most impacted by wildfires."

The bill defines an "appropriate local contractor" as an entity that:

- Has its principal place of business within the state where the project is located,
- 26% or more of its workforce assigned to the project, including subcontractors, reside in the state, or
- The project is located within a 60-mile radius of the state in which the business is registered.

The bill would also require the Secretary of Agriculture to submit annual reports to Congress that include:

- An analysis of the number, value, and percentage of the contracts awarded to appropriate local contractors,
- An assessment of the economic impact on local employment and contractor capacity, and

- A description of the reasons for not awarding contracts to an appropriate local contractor.

The bill is also included in S. 1462, the [Fix Our Forests Act](#), which has been reported favorably out of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry and is awaiting a vote by the full Senate.

Responsible Wildland Fire Recovery Act Introduced in the House and Senate

S. 3149, the [Responsible Wildland Fire Recovery Act](#), has been introduced by Senators Luján (D-NM), Deb Fischer (R-NE), and Cynthia Lummis (R-WY). In the House of Representatives, Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernández (D-NM) has introduced companion legislation, [H.R. 5963](#), under the same name. The bill would allow the Secretary of Agriculture to waive all cost-share requirements for the remediation of damage from wildfire or prescribed fire management activities conducted on National Forest System land.

View the [press release](#).

The bills have been referred to the House Committee on Natural Resources and the House Committee on Agriculture. In the Senate, it has been referred to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry.

Fire Innovation Unit Act Introduced in the House and Senate

Senators Luján (D-NM) and John Curtis (R-UT) have introduced S. 3190, the [Fire Innovation Unit Act](#). The bill would establish a deployment and demonstration pilot program for new and innovative wildfire prevention, detection, communication, response, and mitigation technologies. The Act requires the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior to create a Fire Innovation Unit to coordinate among federal agencies to ensure that piloted wildfire technology is carefully evaluated, deployed, and scaled, including through public-private partnerships. U.S. Representative Young Kim (R-CA) leads companion legislation [H.R. 6094](#) in the House.

The bill is also included in S. 1462, the [Fix our Forests Act](#) (Sec. 303). It has been referred to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs. In the House, it has been referred to the Committee on Natural Resources, the Committee on Agriculture, and the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology.

Speed Act Introduced to Amend the National Environmental Policy Act

Chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources Bruce Westerman (R-AR) and Representative Jared Golden (D-ME) have introduced the [Standardized Permitting and Expediting Economic Development Act](#), which would amend the *National Environmental Policy Act* (NEPA).

Highlights from the bill include:

- Add that NEPA “is a purely procedural statute intended to ensure Federal agencies consider the environmental impacts of their actions during the decision-making process. This Act does not mandate particular results, and only prescribes a process. Nothing in this Act shall be construed to mandate any specific environmental outcome or result.”
- Limits the scope of review to “effects that share a reasonably close causal relationship to, and are proximately caused by, the immediate project or action under consideration; and [that agencies] may not consider effects that are speculative, attenuated from the project or action, separate in time or place from the project or action, or in relation to separate existing or potential future projects or actions.”
- Changes the law to require an agency to prepare an environmental assessment when the action is **not likely to** have a reasonably foreseeable significant effect on the quality of the human environment, or if the significance of such effect is unknown. Currently, NEPA requires that an

environmental assessment must be prepared when the agency action **does not** have a reasonably foreseeable significant effect.

- Limits the need for agencies to undertake new scientific or technical research during environmental review.
- Limits effects an agency must consider to those that share a “close causal relationship to, and are proximately caused by” the action being considered.
- Requires legal review to take place in the U.S. Court of Appeals where the project is located, requires courts to provide “substantial deference” to agencies, limits courts' remedy to remand the final agency action “without vacatur or injunction,” allowing agency actions to take place while they fix any “errors or deficiencies” in the analysis.
- Adds language regarding cooperating agencies to require the lead agency to invite other agencies to become cooperating agencies and convene those agencies.
- Broadens agencies' ability to use programmatic and previously completed environmental reviews.

On December 4, 2025, the House Committee on Natural Resources passed the bill and recommended it be placed on the calendar for a vote by the full House of Representatives.

Timber Production Expansion Guaranteed Loan Program Legislation Introduced

Representatives Dan Newhouse (R-WA) and Terri Sewell (D-AL) have introduced the [*Supporting American Wood and Mill Infrastructure with Loans for Longevity* \(SAWMILL\) Act](#), H.R. 6277. The bill would permanently authorize the Timber Production Expansion Guaranteed Loan Program. Senators Tim Sheehy (R-MT) and Jeff Merkley (D-OR) have introduced [companion legislation](#) in the U.S. Senate.

View the [Newhouse press release](#).

View the [Merkley press release](#).

The Senate version has been referred to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. The House version has been referred to the House Committee on Agriculture and the House Committee on Natural Resources.