

Lack of votes threatens clear-cutting, pulpwood mill bill

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By John Commins Nashville Bureau

NASHVILLE — A bill that regulates large forest clear-cuts and tightens oversight of big pulpwood mills in Tennessee is in trouble for lack of votes, the bill's sponsor said.

Sen. David Fowler, R-Signal Mountain, delayed action on his bill Wednesday in the Senate Environment, Conservation and Tourism Committee after determining the votes weren't there in the nine-member committee.

"I understand it's having trouble in the House as well, so we moved it back," Sen. Fowler said. "We want to see how it goes in the House, and this will give us an opportunity to lobby the bill."

House companion legislation, sponsored by Rep. Mike McDonald, D-Portland, is scheduled for a hearing Tuesday before the House Environment Subcommittee. Rep. McDonald said he's trying to rally support for the bill.

The bill requires chip mills that process more than 80,000 tons of pulpwood a year to go through a registration and permitting process with the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation. TDEC would conduct an environmental impact assessment of timber that is cut.

The Tennessee Forestry Association and the Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation oppose the bill because their officials believe it could place burdens on property owners. They say objections to clear-cutting are emotional and based on aesthetics, rather than on science.

"It places a lot of regulations on private landowners, and it's an extensive permitting process," said Candace Dinwiddie, executive director of the Tennessee Forestry Association. "There is no information or data from any recent studies to indicate that this legislation would help the state, or that clear-cutting is harmful."

Brian Paddock, a lobbyist for Save Our Cumberland Mountains, said the bill is in trouble because the Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation and the Tennessee Forestry Association activated their statewide organizations to oppose the bill.

"They have done an all-handson-deck to get phone calls and pressure on the members," Mr. Paddock said. "We think ordinary folks who are members of the Farm Bureau and the Forestry Association, if they knew what was being said in their name to defend big clear-cuts and chip mills and pine conversions, would not agree."

Rhedona Rose, a lobbyist for the Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation, said her organization worked against the bill.

"It's fair to say that our members are very concerned with the property rights implications of this bill," Ms. Rose said. She said the bill also would take away markets for landowners with lower quality timber that is used for chip mills.

"This is a crop for them," she said.

Sen. Fowler said his bill is not overly restrictive.

"It does not prohibit the removal of timber," he said. "You are free to harvest your timber, but there are certain things we want to make sure you are not doing that would adversely impact the environment. I appreciate and respect private property but private property is not a license to do anything you want and it never has been."

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