

Battle Brews Over Clear Cutting

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A battle is brewing between the logging industry and environmentalists. Lawmakers are debating whether to put some restrictions on clear-cutting.

Four years ago environmentalists flew a news crew from NewsChannel 5 over the Cumberland Plateau and pointed out large areas clear-cut by chip mills.

The mills, which cut tons of lumber, are not regulated in Tennessee. They began moving in about five years ago.

Governor Phil Bredesen, who's a pilot, recently flew over the Plateau and told the Chattanooga Times Free Press that the clear cutting on the plateau was appalling.

"I receive letters from people across the state who can't believe we don't regulate clear cutting in Tennessee," said Representative Mike McDonald, (D) Portland.

He's pushed for a bill that has failed in recent years that would require chip mills to get a permit and say how much they plan to cut.

"We allow these out of state companies to come into our state (and) cut all they want to cut. We have no idea how much they are extracting from our forests. They devastate our biodiversity, they make a lot of money and they leave the state," McDonald said.

Officials with the Tennessee Forestry Association, which represents the timber industry, said they oppose the bill.

"There's no credible data that clear cutting is a problem in Tennessee," said Candace Dinwiddie, spokeswoman for the association.

She also said the state can't regulate private property. "It would hurt landowners looking for a market for their lumber. It sends a message that the forest industry is not welcome in Tennessee."

Some might think, based on Governor Bredesen's comments, that the governor supports regulating clear-cutting, but instead of making the decision himself he let it up to the Department of Agriculture, which opposes the bill.

A spokesman with the Department of Agriculture said they oppose the bill because it puts undue regulations on an important industry. He said there's no proof clear cutting is a problem.

Environmentalists said that's because chip mills aren't required to give any details about what they're cutting.

The bill will go up for a vote in a house subcommittee Tuesday.

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