Background

Today, our forests are overstocked with trees that currently hold little value in commercial wood markets, including timber that are small in diameter, sick, or low-strength. Overstocked forests greatly increase the threat of catastrophic wildfire, and there exists scientific consensus that active forest management is key to strengthening forest resilience and avoiding costly wildfire damage. In addition, new innovations that utilize low-value timber can further expand markets in the forest products sector. By increasing the demand for low-value timber, we can make our forests healthier and our communities thrive.

Currently, mass timber remains an early but promising application of low value timber. The durable material can reduce construction and transportation schedules while emitting less carbon in its lifecycle compared to other components. However, high costs and unfamiliarity in the industry remain large barriers for widespread adoption.

To increase demand for low value timber, the federal government can bolster industry collaboration efforts similar to the success found at the Department of Energy (DOE). DOE has more than 40,000 patents and 1,400 active licenses, while the US Forest Service (USFS) has only 42 patents and eight active licenses. A closer connection between Forest Service research and the wood products industry could promote more profitable use of small-diameter timber and similar material that comes out of forest management projects.

Summary

The Forest Bioeconomy Act works to expand research and build new innovative markets for forest products, especially low-value timber. Specifically, the bill would:

- Directs USDA to expand research of low value commercial timber to support new wood products markets, sustain the wood products manufacturing sector, and as a feedstock for sustainable fuel.
- Create a small business voucher program modeled after successful programs at DOE and the Small Business Administration. Under the program, eligible small businesses will receive vouchers to use USFS research facilities for research and development, technology transfer, skills training, or other activities in order to support the commercialization of novel products.
- Create an Office of Technology Transfer under the USFS to bridge the gap between research and commercialization. Commercialization and technology transfer activities would be required key performance indicators submitted by the Forest Service in its annual budget.
- Authorize the National Forest Foundation, the Congressionally chartered foundation for USFS, to assist with the commercialization of USFS research.
- Create a coordinating entity to ensure that academic research on wood use is meeting the needs of the housing and forest products industry.