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Thompson quizzes Agriculture rep on Allegheny Forest

The lawmaker questions Jay Jensen at a hearing before a House Agriculture subcommittee.

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Congressman Glenn "GT" Thompson on Wednesday pushed the U.S. Forest Service to acknowledge that the economic downturn around the Allegheny National Forest was due to actions of the Forest Service in regard to oil and gas development and timbering.

Jay Jensen, deputy undersecretary for natural resources and the environment at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, replied, "I share your sensitivities around the (Forest). We need to look at the nation's energy needs. I am hoping our actions to date have been moving forward with both those two, but that we must be mindful of protections as well."

Agriculture is the department that has auspices over the U.S. Forest Service. Thompson said he got Jensen's word that he would join the congressman for a formal discussion on the Forest in the near future.

Thompson pressed Jensen at Wednesday's hearing before a House Agriculture Subcommittee about the Web site maintained by the U.S. Forest Service. Thompson said he saw an obvious shift in priorities by Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell that focus on climate change, water issues and encouraging children to enjoy the outdoors.

Thompson said the words "climate change" were repeated 15 times on the home page of the Web site but there was no mention of timber harvesting, and he asked for Jensen's opinion on that matter.

"I will turn back to the Forest Service mission statement that we are to sustain the health, resilience and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations," Jensen said. "There is a place for timber and a place for oil and gas development but we must focus on what is being left behind."

Finally, Thompson told Jensen of a meeting he had with Kimbell in which he asked why the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was being applied to oil and gas leases in the Forest when it wasn't in the past. These leases are privately owned and historically have fallen under state environmental regulations.

Thompson asked Kimbell what studies had been done to justify NEPA, to which she replied that there were none — that they relied on photos of environmental

damage.

"I don't know enough about the details, but I will look into it," Jensen said.

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