

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, Saturday, July 25, 2015: “Wyo. trees must be saved”

Casper Star Tribune, Sunday, July 26: “Wyo. trees are in trouble”

Trees are the lungs of this world. Trees provide the oxygen we need to survive. Wyoming trees are in trouble, and in Washington, a Wyoming senator is doing nothing to help. Indeed, he may be making things worse.

On June 25, 2015, U.S. Sen. John Barrasso introduced S.1691, his National Forest Ecosystem Improvement Act of 2015. Regrettably, the act is headed in the wrong direction. Meanwhile, more than 70 million trees are turned into clothing every year, through a pulping process that is criminally wasteful.

By 2050, climate change may have denuded Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks of trees, a recent study reveals. Rising temperatures portend increased bark-beetle populations that, along with hotter climates, contribute to wildfires that kill the famous conifers. The study suggests that the changes will devastate the wildlife in the two parks, which in turn voids a \$502 million tourist industry.

First off, a fire-fighting budget is a must. This means establishing a special fund with which the national forest service may cover the expense of very large fires. As it stands, fire-fighting costs must be met from other agency programs. Under its current budget, the very act of fighting fires cuts into forest-service programs that seek to reduce fire danger.

U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell, therefore, criticized Sen. Barrasso’s bill, which makes it a priority to “establish a reliable timber supply” — the bill would require one million acres of cutting a year, of which 400,000 acres would be commercially logged. At a senate subcommittee hearing, Mr. Tidwell stated that today’s system results in “funding transfers” to the firefighting account that decimates other forest-service programs. An emergency funding plan, proposed by the Obama Administration, would allow the agency to carry on with “helping forests adapt to the growing effects of climate change, and preparing communities . . . for future wildfires.”

Astoundingly, S.1691 further proposes to eliminate certain environmental reviews through an existing provision called “categorical exclusion,” currently applied to projects too small to require analysis. Mr. Barrasso’s scheme would extend the provision to projects stretching across as much as 15,000 acres. This, Mr. Tidwell suggested, would create needless busywork.

So much for members of congress addressing climate chaos at the national level.

At the global level, to those of us who believe textiles like rayon to be more eco-friendly than cotton, Rain Forest Action Network (RAN) brings disturbing news: “If you are wearing rayon, viscose, modal or tencel, you are wearing trees.”

These textiles begin as wood chips that are turned into a product called dissolving pulp. The pulping process ensures that rainforest destruction “hides in our clothes,” says RAN.

Rayon is a textile filament derived from wood chips treated with caustic soda and carbon disulfide. The resultant solution, viscose, is “a threat to forests that has been hiding in plain sight for years.”

Deforestation has intensified large-scale in the rainforest of Indonesia. According to Global Forest Watch, between 2001 and 2013 alone, the country lost over 15 million hectares (60,000 square miles) of tree cover. On the island of Sumatra, for example, a major contributor to deforestation is the wood-pulping giant Toba Pulp Lestari, whose products are used to make both paper goods and textiles. Demand for dissolving pulp is growing, and wood-based fabrics are gaining market share against cotton and synthetic textiles.

Toba Pulp’s website claims it uses eucalyptus trees raised on its own tree farms, but RAN reports that local people in Sumatra, who depend on the rainforest for their livelihood, have been fighting the Toba Pulp mill “for the last 20-plus years.” The land legally belongs to the government, which gives logging concessions in conflict with communities’ rights.

Its properties similar to cotton but can be made to resemble silk. One clothing-industry website terms it “synthetic” along with “acrylic, polyester, nylon, lycra.” These fabrics are “easy to care for, have a little stretch, lots of breathability (so important in the warmer climates we are coming to know!), and ease of movement,” says FashionResurrected.

The Materials Sustainability Index ranks environmental impacts of wood-based rayon below conventional cotton, polyester, even linen. Only about 30 percent of the wood can be successfully converted to pulp, the rest is left to rot in what was rainforest terra, or it’s discarded as waste. The chemicals to convert wood to fiber release carbon disulfide into the air and salt by-products into streams. Big-name fashion brands are complicit in the pulping of pristine forests, for a product that makes its way into the clothes we wear.

There are better ways. Trees can be conserved while sustainable fabrics are developed that are just as soft and cool as rayon—as 26 countries around the globe have discovered. These countries produce hemp for use in paper-goods and textiles production, but the U.S. is not among them. Nor is Indonesia.