Getting out of the red by going green

In the midst of the federal budget-cutting frenzy, Washington environmental groups are hoping to find a niche. For the second year, a loose coalition of two dozen environmental and taxpayer groups joined forces to issue the Green Scissors report, which suggests ways to cut federal spending while helping the environment. This year's edition makes 47 recommendations, for an estimated savings of $39 billion over five years. At the end of fiscal year 1995, the federal deficit was $164 billion.

Some suggestions involve high-profile issues, such as grazing on public rangeland, which environmentalists have challenged unsuccessfully for years (BioScience 41: 668). The fees charged ranchers for grazing livestock on federal lands will generate $25 million in 1996, according to the report, whereas managing these activities will cost the government at least $77 million. By ending livestock feed subsidies and increasing grazing fees, an estimated $250 million could be saved over five years. The report also recommends policy changes to discourage overgrazing, which leads to soil erosion and harm to riparian areas.

Other agriculture-related proposals in the report include eliminating funds for the Boll Weevil Eradication Program, which would save the government $80 million over five years. The boll weevil program relies on aerial spraying of the pesticide malathion, which has been linked to fish kills in Alabama.

By targeting such programs, the Green Scissors coalition has attracted an unusual mix of groups, including Taxpayers for Common Sense, the Concord Coalition, the American Lung Association, and a host of environmental organizations, including Friends of the Earth (FOE), Clean Water Action, and the National Audubon Society. "The Green Scissors coalition is very important in building allies. [We] have a lot more success working with fiscal conservatives than environmentalists would have just going it alone," says Gawain Kripke, director of FOE's Appropriations Project.

"There are some who argue that if you cut the federal budget, you'll harm the environment," says Martha Phillips, executive director of the Concord Coalition, a bipartisan organization dedicated to balancing the budget. "We don't think that's true. It's possible to keep those programs that protect the environment and still cut the budget."

One example of this merging of taxpayer and environmental concerns is the federally subsidized clearcut logging of Alaska's Tongass National Forest. According to the report, "The Tongass is the biggest money loser in the National Forest system. The General Accounting Office found that from 1992-1994, Tongass timber program outlays exceeded revenues to the US Treasury by $102 million."

The 17-million-acre Tongass, the largest remaining temperate rain forest on Earth (BioScience 44: 215), is home to the world's greatest concentrations of grizzly bears and bald eagles, and its rivers support all five species of Pacific salmon. Alaska's congressional delegation has proposed legislation to allow increased logging to levels that would cost the government an additional $18-$20 million per year. Rather than spend an additional $100 million over the next five years, the report recommends maintaining logging at current levels.

Another $475 million could be saved by eliminating construction of new forest roads. Based on an analysis by the Wilderness Society, more than 360,000 miles of roads have been built on national forest lands, eight times the size of the Interstate Highway System. Over the last seven years, the US Forest Service ran its timber program at a $1.9-billion loss, in large part because of the cost of road construction. The resulting deforestation contributed to soil erosion, migration routes, and loss of wildlife habitat.

Other proposals include:

- Termination of the proposed Animas-La Plata Water Project in southwest Colorado, to save $400 million. The project's aim is to drain water from the Animas River and pump it more than 1000 feet uphill to irrigate crops. Several endangered fish species would be threatened.
- Elimination of funding for the proposed Auburn Dam on the American River, near Sacramento, California, to save $70 million. The area provides habitat for bear, eagles, river otters, mountain lions, and trout.

Legislation has been introduced for some of these proposals. For example, in February Rep. Thomas Petri (R-WI) introduced a bill to bar federal funding of Auburn Dam. However, Rep. John Doolittle (R-CA), whose district would include the dam, says he is making construction a priority. Environmental groups are hoping budget-cutting pressures will work to their advantage in such battles.

Note: Green Scissors 96 is available via the Internet at http://www.foe.org/FOE, or for $14.00 from Friends of the Earth, 1025 Vermont Avenue, NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20005.