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Forest Service cancels plan to log near Grand Canyon

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PHOENIX – The U.S. Forest Service has canceled plans to do prescribed burns and forest thinning on more than 17,000 acres near the north rim of the Grand Canyon.

The project raised the ire of environmentalists who called it a sale of old growth timber that would not help restore the Kaibab National Forest to a healthy state.

The Sierra Club and the Center for Biological Diversity sued the Forest Service in federal court to stop to so-called East Rim project. The suit alleged the government plan failed to protect the endangered Mexican spotted owl and threatened northern goshawks that inhabit the Kaibab plateau.

A federal judge ruled in favor of the government last year, but the groups filed an appeal, which is still pending.

The government pulled the East Rim project Tuesday because so much time had elapsed since it was conceived that new studies of the bird populations would be required, said Cathie Schmidlin, a spokeswoman for the Kaibab National Forest.

“There’s been several years since surveys were done for each of those birds,” Schmidlin said, noting that the suit was not a motivating factor.

The Forest Service hasn’t decided what to do next, she said.

The Sierra Club and the Center for Biological Diversity contend the project would have permitted the commercial logging of tens of thousands of large, fire resistant trees, and brought little fire reduction benefit.

“The decision to abandon this controversial timber sale is a wake-up call that the Forest Service must fund projects that actually protect communities from wildfire, instead of logging in remote areas,” Roxanne George with the Sierra Club said in a statement.

Todd Schulke with the Center for Biological Diversity said there’s no excuse to log old-growth trees – most 100 years or older – when communities are at risk for fire.

But Schmidlin said the plan used several different ways, including some logging, to bring parts of the overgrown forest back into balance and cut fire risks.