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Easing of Northwest Logging Rules Blocked

by The Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) -- A federal judge struck down a move by the Bush administration to ease logging restrictions in the Northwest, saying the government failed to consider the effect on rare plants and animals.

U.S. District Judge Marsha Pechman said in her ruling Monday that under federal law, authorities had an obligation to show why the logging restrictions should be changed.

Pechman said she would not issue any specific injunctions pending further hearings, and the U.S. Forest Service said Tuesday it hopes to salvage the Bush initiative by fixing the problems cited by the judge.

The rule change, which took effect in the spring of 2004, said forest managers no longer had to look for rare species before logging. The timber industry had complained for years that the rules were overly intrusive and could take years to complete.

Instead, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management were to use information provided by state officials in Washington, Oregon and California in determining whether to allow logging, prescribed burns, and trail- or campground-building.

The change applied to 5.5 million acres of old-growth and other forests in the Northwest.

A coalition of environmental groups sued to stop the change, saying it would double logging on federal land in the region and have disastrous consequences for rare species. They cheered the ruling Tuesday.

about old-growth forests in our region and the species that depend on them," said Dominick DellaSala, a forest ecologist with the World Wildlife Fund, one of the plaintiffs in the case.

Rex Holloway, a regional spokesman for the Forest Service, said the agency's lawyers were reviewing the decision and the "inadequacies" pointed out by the judge.

"That's a huge decision for people who care