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News briefs from California's Central Coast

By The Associated Press

Environmentalists are protesting a U.S. Forest Service decision to expand oil drilling in Los Padres National Forest.

In a motion filed Thursday, three conservation groups said forest drilling would threaten pristine creeks, spoil scenic vistas and harm wildlife.

"The agency's plan requires a vast network of roads, pipelines and transmission wires that will cut through the heart of some of the most sensitive areas of the forest, including key habitat for the critically endangered California condor," Defenders of Wildlife spokeswoman Kim Delfino said.

The California attorney general's office filed a separate appeal of the Los Padres decision earlier this week.

The Forest Service announcement in July by Los Padres supervisor Gloria Brown said an additional 52,000 acres of the forest would be open to oil and gas development. New surface drilling, power lines and roads would be limited to 4,000 acres, and the remaining 48,000 would be open for underground slant drilling.

There are now about 4,900 acres leased for oil and gas development.

The new areas open to oil and gas leasing are primarily in the Sierra Madre foothills south of Cuyama, where the Sisquoc Condor Sanctuary was once used as a site for releasing the birds back into the wild.

Defenders of Wildlife, Los Padres ForestWatch of Santa Barbara and Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity filed the appeal. They claim forest officials relied on outdated reports to assess the potential harm to the environment from more oil development.