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OIL AND GAS: Forest Service opens 52,000 acres of a Calif. national forest for drilling

The Forest Service will open nearly 52,000 acres of California's Los Padres National Forest to oil and gas companies for leases for drilling, the agency said yesterday.

Officials said that the plan will not negatively impact the habitat for the endangered California condor in the 2 million-acre forest that stretches across 220 miles north of Los Angeles. Companies would have to obtain leases through to the Bureau of Land Management after undergoing environmental review. Companies would have access to an estimated 17 million barrels of crude oil or natural gas.

"I feel that it provides for the protection of ecological values that are so important to the American public, while still offering a portion of our oil and gas potential to the nation," said Forest Supervisor Gloria Brown (AP/ San Francisco Chronicle online , July 28).

Only 4,277 of the 52,000 acres would be opened up to roads and oil and gas rigs, with the rest of the development occurring through slant drilling from neighboring land. As few as 21 acres may be needed for roads and drilling pads, Forest Service officials said.

Although the Forest Service conducted a ten-year study prior to making yesterday's decision, many oppose the plan. "For the amount of oil that is contained in the Los Padres, we feel these lands would be far better off protected for wildlife, water resources and cultural resources," said Dan Smuts of the Wilderness Society. "It's well known that the condors use the entire forest as feeding grounds, and to say this won't have an impact is disingenuous."

Monica Bond of the Center for Biological Diversity said the group is "looking into the possibility of legally challenging" the plan.

"I put all that together and spent a lot of sleepless nights trying to make the right decision," said Brown. "The analysis did not support a position of no leasing. It really did show you can mitigate" for the drilling (Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times , July 29). -- LK