

Op-Ed: Forest Service thinning plans nothing short of catastrophic

Conservation groups' recent objection to the Jack Smith timber sale, northeast of Flagstaff, is based on a change in Forest Service regional wildlife rules that threatens southwestern forests, imperiled species, and what until recently seemed like a growing consensus in favor of careful forest restoration.

Last February the Forest Service illegally changed a rule affecting management of all national forests in Arizona and New Mexico for northern goshawks -- a declining raptor whose survival depends on mature forests with abundant canopy.

The illegal new rule sharply reduces residual forest cover down to as little as 10 percent, while increasing logging of fire-resistant large trees and mature stands. Applied locally and regionally, these changes threaten the ecological integrity of forests and the well-being of wildlife that depends on them.

Just as the original rule underwent public and environmental review in 1996, so too should the new one. But with a flagrant disregard for both public participation and the rule of law, the Forest Service ignored biologists' concerns, excluded wildlife agencies, and illegally sidestepped public scrutiny in making its new rule.

So it's no surprise that the Jack Smith timber sale, the first timber sale implementing the illegal new rule, has been remanded by the Coconino National Forest for additional analysis. But in light of objections by the Center for Biological Diversity and Forest Guardians, the Forest Service must go beyond re-analyzing this particular sale to initiating an in-depth environmental and public review of the rule.

Despite the collaboration touted by the Daily Sun, members of the Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership raised some of the same concerns listed in our objection. But it took objections for the Forest Service to acknowledge those concerns and agree to reanalysis.

More broadly, the Forest Service's unilateral approach to developing the illegal new rule marks a sharp departure from the spirit of collaboration that has emerged for restoring degraded forests. As reflected in the White Mountains Stewardship Contract and the Arizona Forest Restoration Strategy, a fragile agreement has been born in the Southwest for managing forests in a way that protects communities, conserves wildlife, and thins small trees to safely restore beneficial fires.

But the new rule and the Jack Smith timber sale threaten that agreement. If expanded to other projects in the Southwest, the false choice between catastrophic fire and catastrophic thinning promises a counterproductive distraction. By building on our common successes rather than developing illegal rules and timber sales, the Forest Service could embrace the growing agreement for careful restoration strategies. This would allow all of us to focus our energies on the good work of restoration, from which countless benefits would be realized for the future of public forests and wildlife.

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