



## 7. **FORESTS:** Groups challenge post-fire logging project near Grand Canyon

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April Reese, E&E Western reporter

Environmental groups are seeking to block a Forest Service proposal to log more than 9,100 acres of wildfire-damaged lands immediately north of the Grand Canyon.

The Kaibab National Forest approved the salvage logging project, called the "Warm Fire Recovery Project," in March. It calls for culling burned trees in a mixed conifer forest scorched by the June 2006 "Warm Fire." The fire was initially allowed to burn as a "wildland fire" but eventually spread across 40,000 acres and had to be contained.

According to the Forest Service, "much of that area burned at a high intensity and suffered severe fire effects."

But the project's challengers -- including the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and WildEarth Guardians -- say logging will undermine the natural recovery of the forest and degrade habitat for the federally protected Mexican spotted owl.

The Forest Service has 45 days to respond to the groups' May 15 appeal.



The 2006 Warm Fire spread across 40,000 acres of Arizona's Kaibab National Forest. As part of its wildfire recovery plan, the Forest Service wants to salvage log more than 9,100 acres near the Grand Canyon. Photo courtesy of the Forest Service.

"I was just out there last week, and it's just astounding how much growth there is," said the Center for Biological Diversity's Jay Lininger, who was a fire effects monitor with Grand Canyon National Park at the time of the Warm Fire and helped suppress it. "There's lupine and aspen growing all over the place."

The groups are also concerned about the project's inclusion of 3,460 acres designated in 2004 as critical habitat for the Mexican spotted owl, a threatened species. Under the project plan, the Forest Service plans to leave five to seven standing dead trees, or "snags," per acre in the critical habitat area for the owls, as well as about seven logs per acre.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has agreed with the Forest Service's determination that the project is not likely to adversely affect the owl and its habitat, particularly now that the area has burned.

"That area is designated habitat to facilitate dispersal and foraging, but there are no owls there now," said Jeff Humphrey, a spokesman for FWS in Arizona. "Our concurrence [with the Forest Service] was largely driven by that and the fact that with the burning of that forest there were no longer those elements that support owl packs. The fire set habitat development back."

But Lininger said there is evidence that Mexican spotted owls will use burned forest. Logging, he said, will render the habitat in the Warm Fire area unpalatable for the birds.

In addition to the feared ecological effects of logging the area, critics say the project makes little sense economically.

According to the Forest Service's economic analysis for the Warm Fire Rehabilitation and Recovery Plan, "the costs of project planning, field preparation and administration of both the salvage harvest and the reforestation work are more than the anticipated harvest revenue."

Stacey Hamburg, conservation program manager for the Sierra Club's Grand Canyon Chapter, said, "At a loss of \$2 million, it doesn't benefit the U.S. Treasury."

### A battle over science

The Kaibab National Forest, which sits adjacent to the Grand Canyon on the Kaibab Plateau, has met controversy over a number of issues in recent years, including off-highway vehicle use and uranium mining.

At the heart of the fracas over the Warm Fire area is a longstanding debate over the ecological effects of salvage logging in burned forests.

In the [environmental impact statement](#) for the project, Kaibab National Forest officials cite a 2008 analysis by retired forest planner

Bruce Higgins that examined four areas previously burned in or near the Warm Fire area and concluded that salvage logging does not substantially delay recovery or exacerbate the damage from fire.

"Salvage logging after uncharacteristic fires as practiced in these examples has not had an observable adverse effect upon site productivity ten to forty years later," the Higgins report states. Among other things, logging reduced the amount of woody debris in the burned forest, but not below desirable levels, it says.

But a subsequent [report](#) issued by Forest Service and university researchers in March that synthesized the findings of 25 studies found that the effects of post-fire salvage logging can range from "negligible to highly significant" ([Land Letter](#), March 26).

That report warned that since wildfires disturb forest ecosystems -- killing trees, harming or displacing wildlife, scorching soils and increasing runoff and erosion -- forest managers should carefully consider whether an area can withstand further disturbance from logging, and if so, how much. And if logging is conducted, it should be done soon after the fire to minimize environmental impacts, the authors concluded.

Under the Warm Fire Recovery Project, salvage logging would commence three years after the fire occurred.

David Peterson, a scientist with the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station and lead author on the March report, said this week that "the evidence described in our report can be applied pretty much to any forest ecosystem in the Southwest."

But Tim Short, district ranger for the North Kaibab Ranger District, said observations of past salvage-logging projects on the Kaibab Plateau by other agency foresters strongly suggest that such logging does not impede recovery.

Given the size and severity of the Warm Fire, many more burned trees than normal could eventually fall, potentially creating a new fire risk, he said.

"Our view is that it would be irresponsible to ignore the long-term heavy fuel accumulations that future managers would be faced with without treatment and the potential for another fire with very severe effects," Short said. "We strove to find balance between reducing excess fuel loading and associated fire risk into the future and having enough coarse woody debris left for soils and wildlife habitat."

Short also emphasized that only 23 percent of the 40,000 acres burned by the fire will be logged, and harvesting will only take place when there is snow cover or when soils are dry to reduce the likelihood of soil damage and erosion. Finally, areas disturbed by logging activities will be reseeded to aid recovery, he said.

*April Reese writes from Santa Fe, N.M.*



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