

VENTURA COUNTY STAR

Lockyer, groups appeal decision to open Los Padres for energy production

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State Attorney General Bill Lockyer and three conservation groups this week appealed a federal decision to open 52,000 acres of the Los Padres National Forest — more than half in Ventura County — for potential oil and gas production.

Most of the local portion lies near the Sespe oil fields north of Fillmore. County Supervisor Steve Bennett is asking the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday to register its opposition to the U.S. Forest Service decision as well.

“Ventura County already makes an ample contribution to the nation’s energy sources without developing those lands set aside in public ownership as a national forest,” he wrote to the board.

Bennett said he did not consider his stance a tough sell in the face of high gas prices because the leases would produce less than a day’s supply of the nation’s oil.

“We could deal so easily with that with conservation,” he said in an interview.

A study shows that the amount of land that would actually be disturbed would be less than 21 acres in the vast forest of 1.8 million acres, U.S. Forest Service officials said Thursday.

Los Padres Supervisor Gloria Brown, who made the decision in July, determined that about 4,300 acres would be available for direct exploration.

Producers couldn’t directly work the remaining 48,000 acres but could tap into them with wells drilled underground from nearby land.

Opponents say Brown’s decision was based on a 13-year-old study, relies on inaccurate projections, severely underestimates the current price of oil and understates the effect on the environment.

“The Forest Service has failed to uphold the high level of scientific integrity called for by our nation’s longstanding environmental laws and has acted recklessly toward condors, other endangered species and the public’s right to recreate on public lands,” said John Buse, staff attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, Ariz. Other agencies filing appeals were the Los Padres ForestWatch, based in Santa Barbara, and Defenders of Wildlife in Washington, D.C.

Lockyer contended that Brown’s decision violated technical requirements, was premature and failed to adequately analyze potential environmental impacts, in violation of federal law.

Opponents had 45 days to appeal, a deadline that will pass today. Regional Forester Bernie Weingardt, the top U.S. Forest Service officer in California, is charged with ruling on the issues within 160 days.

If Weingardt upholds Brown’s decision, the appellants’ only recourse is a lawsuit, Forest Service spokesman Matt Mathes said.

Los Padres is the only one of the 18 national forests in California with significant oil and gas deposits lying under it, Mathes said.

A law passed by Congress in 1987 required the Forest Service to identify lands with potential for oil and gas leasing, officials said.

Brown could not be reached for comment Thursday, but spokeswoman Kathy Good said her decision does not mean drilling will be done.

“This makes land available for leasing,” she said. “If the lands are leased, site-specific environmental analyses are required before any activity or development could take place.”