



Adverse ruling covers local thinning

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If the U.S. Forest Service halts some forest thinning projects in response to a Wednesday ruling, northern Arizona would be affected.

The Kaibab and Coconino national forests have not conducted comprehensive environmental reviews in order to speed along forest thinning and prescribed burning 11 times in recent years.

Some projects have already been completed, but others are still in the planning stages.

The 5-year-old policy recently struck down in court -- part of President Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative -- has been used to thin or conduct prescribed burns on northern Arizona's forests with the intent of reducing forest fuels and averting large wildfires.

District rangers have either waived or made plans to waive in-depth environmental reviews near Munds Park, Lake Mary, Flagstaff's Railroad Springs, Skunk Canyon, the U.S. Naval Observatory and on Mormon Mountain. The projects were all aimed at reducing fuel buildup, according to Forest Service documents and spokeswomen on the Kaibab and Coconino forests.

The same has been true northwest of Tusayan and in several places on the North Kaibab Ranger District.

The legislation deemed illegal by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Wednesday had given the forests the authority to log up to 1,000 acres and conduct prescribed burns on up to 4,500 acres per project without the routine environmental analysis that can take a year or longer.

"The ruling reinstates informed decisions for certain categories of public forest management. That's good news for forests and wildlife," said Taylor McKinnon, of the Center for Biological Diversity.

A national spokesman said the agency had not yet decided what Wednesday's ruling meant, or whether such projects would come to a halt.

The more recent policy was used in planning thinning around Munds Park, for example, where 990 acres are supposed to be thinned and 2,960 are to receive prescribed burns to reduce high fire danger.

The existence of any Native American cultural sites, pre-identified endangered species, watersheds and research areas was considered by the district ranger.

The size of trees to be logged was capped to limit impacts to bald eagles and Mexican spotted owls.

The considerations at Munds Park were documented in a letter, which can be viewed at:
www.fs.fed.us/r3/coconino/nepa/2007/munds-park-fuels/2007-09-12-mp-decision-memo.pdf.

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