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California environmentalists sue U.S. over slashing of 'indicator species' list

Groups contend that the Forest Service's shrinking of the threatened species list from about 60 to 13 is an attempt to boost logging in the Sierra Nevada.

By Eric Bailey
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SACRAMENTO -- Environmentalists on Tuesday sued the Bush administration over what they contend are efforts to boost Sierra Nevada logging by undercutting a key early warning system that guards bellwether species.

The lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in San Francisco contends that a policy shift by the U.S. Forest Service last December abandons its stewardship responsibilities by slashing the list of 60 or so "indicator species" to only 13.

Among those hit are the Sierra bighorn sheep, the endangered California condor and the northern goshawk, a raptor species. Eleven threatened or endangered species were removed from the list, including the Central Valley spring run chinook salmon and the Lahontan cutthroat trout.

"It's another example of favoring timber sales and receipts over the protection of wildlife," said Pat

Gallagher, environmental law director at the Sierra Club, one of four conservation organizations that joined in the lawsuit.

The Forest Service has maintained that the oversight changes were justified because the process of monitoring such species over the last quarter of a century had in many cases proved unworkable.

John Heil, a spokesman for the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region, said populations of many of the indicator species, such as red fox, wolverine and willow flycatcher, were too sparse to use as measures of forest health.

"There's just not sufficient numbers to collect meaningful information," Heil said.

But environmentalists say the Forest Service is shutting its eyes to its responsibility to ensure healthy and well-distributed populations of plants and animals up and down the 400-mile range shadowing California's eastern edge.

Erin Tobin, an associate attorney with Earthjustice, the nonprofit

environmental law firm that filed the suit, said the change is "part of a trend" toward minimizing roadblocks to logging or other commercial activities in the forest.

The policy shift also allows logging to begin before determining what effect it will have on imperiled creatures.

Earthjustice filed the lawsuit on behalf of Sierra Forest Legacy, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and Defenders of Wildlife.

Ten forests encompassing nearly 10 million acres of timberland were hit by the rule change: Eldorado, Inyo, Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Sequoia, Sierra, Stanislaus and the Tahoe National Forests, as well as the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.