

Loggers: Legal battles cut us out

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Prices and demand for wood are near record levels, but loggers say legal appeals have virtually shut them out of some of the finest stands of timber in the 800,000-acre White Mountain National Forest.

"Pulp mills are screaming for supply ... you have mills and loggers trying to get stumpage to market, and they can't take advantage of it," said Jasen Stock, executive director of the New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association.

As soon as this week, the U.S. Forest Service expects to hear whether the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First District in Boston will issue a temporary restraining order to halt logging in the forest, as requested by The Sierra Club, Wilderness Society and The Center for Biological Diversity (formerly Forest Watch).

The legal action has had a chilling effect on timber sales, forest officials said. Federal budget cuts and redirection of funds to fight wildfires in the West are also sapping the industry.

White Mountain National Forest Supervisor Tom Wagner said his employees must analyze each proposed timber sale to determine impacts on water, wildlife and aesthetics. He said he expects funding to allow for only 15 instead of the projected 24 million measured board feet of lumber to be cut in 2009.

The three conservation groups argued in U.S. District Court that the 2005 forest plan -- a master plan of sorts done every 15 years

-- was not reviewed adequately and logging and road building needed for these sales would spoil the environment.

"This case will set national precedent as to whether roadless areas will continue to be protected," said Catherine Corkery, chapter director of the New Hampshire Sierra Club .

Roger Garland Jr. owns a logging business in North Conway and has been logging in the White Mountains since 1975.

He said he has crews poised to begin work in the White Mountain National Forest near Jackson. He said he has spent thousands preparing roads and streams to safely bring 15,000 tons of low-grade wood to market. Most would be used for pulp to make paper and biomass to fuel wood-to-energy plants. But he is going slowly, aware a court decision could halt everything.

"People want a renewable fuel supply, but they don't want it coming off this forest," Garland said.

Ross D'Elia, owner of the wood products company HHP in Henniker, successfully bid on one of the federal timber sales and has a crew ready to begin to cut. But he's not sure if he would be willing to go through the bidding process again. It is too bad New Hampshire consumers cannot access the renewable energy supply on their own federal land, he said.

"It's a shame to pollute other parts of the world looking for coal and oil so we can stay warm and keep our lights," he said.

The lack of timber sales is also affecting about 35 towns in the White Mountain National Forest that receive yield tax payments from timber cuts. Rumney's 2007 town report, for example, shows it received \$44,289 in payments, used to pay for schools.