



National forest logging project in N.H. moves forward

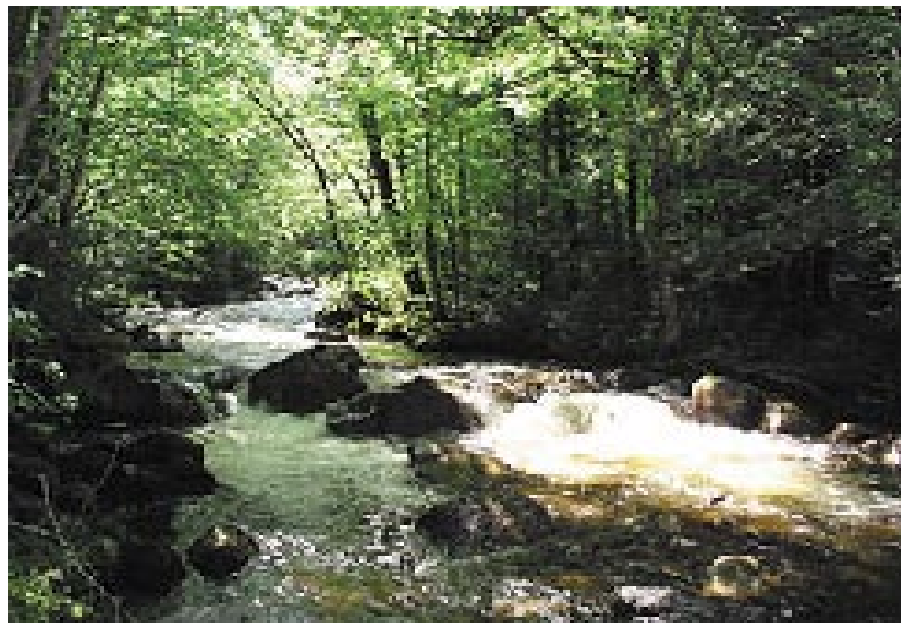
Daniel Cusick, *E&E Reporter*

The Forest Service has rejected an appeal by conservation groups seeking to halt logging and road construction activities in the Kilkenny Roadless Area in the White Mountain National Forest, the agency announced last week.

The appeal, filed in January by the [Center for Biological Diversity](#) and the Sierra Club, opposed the Mill Brook Project, a proposed timber sale in a protected area of the forest in northern New Hampshire (Land Letter, Jan. 8).

[CBD](#) and the Sierra Club's Vermont and New Hampshire chapters had argued that the planned timber sale violated the federal roadless rule and would degrade essential wildlife habitat for several rare species and for those stressed by climate change.

"Once more, officials at the White Mountain National Forest prove just how out of touch they are with both conservation science and the desires of the American people," said Mollie Matteson, a Vermont-based conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, in a statement responding to the service's Feb. 17 decision.



The Mill Brook project includes plans for vegetation management, wildlife habitat improvement and watershed restoration, such as along the area pictured above. But environmental groups say thinning of timber from roadless areas violates federal law. Photo courtesy of the Forest Service.

"National forest roadless area protection has immense popular support, in New England and nationwide. How long is this agency going to keep its head in the sand?" Matteson added.

Forest Service officials who approved the logging of 313 acres in the Kilkenny roadless area last November have maintained that the areas identified for timber harvest are not subject to the 2001 roadless rule. Rather, under the 2005 Forest Plan, the Kilkenny area is designated as a "forest plan roadless area," meaning it is

not subject to the timbering and roadbuilding restrictions of the 2001 rule.

Moreover, in its timbering proposal, the Forest Service contends that cutting in the area will actually "provide environmental benefits by improving forest health, increasing wildlife habitat diversity, and more broadly, increasing biological diversity across the Mill Brook landscape."

The Forest Service's rejection of the Mill Brook appeal is the latest in a string of setbacks for environmental

groups, which two weeks ago lost a federal court challenge of two other roadless area timber sales covering 1,300 acres in the White Mountain forest.

The 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston said the service had not “brushed off environmental concerns” about the planned Than and Batchelder timber projects, as was alleged by the Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Wilderness Society, but rather had simply reached a different conclusion about the effects than the plaintiffs’ groups.

“The Forest Service’s [environmental assessment] discussion makes clear that it considered all of the arguable categories of harm -- such as visual effects, noise, soil effects, impact on wildlife, road and bridge construction or maintenance, and impact on watershed -- and that it addressed and answered claims concerning precedential significance, impact on wilderness designation and the impact of the roadless rule,” the court ruled.

But critics say the Forest Service’s view of roadless protection is short-sighted and fails to account for the significant ecological stresses already being felt by species due to habitat destruction and the gradual warming of surface temperatures caused by climate change. While some species are adapting to these stresses by shifting habitats and behaviors, others are simply disappearing from parts of their former range, Matteson said. “Furthermore, cutting trees, especially the big, old ones that characterize roadless areas, releases carbon dioxide” to the atmosphere, she added.

In the White Mountain National

Forest, roadless areas account for some the largest and most isolated tracts in the East. And while not a pristine forest, the area is immensely popular for tourists and provides some of New England’s habitat to moose, black bear, American marten, northern goshawk, Canada lynx and wild brook-trout.

Matteson of the Center for Biological Diversity said the Forest Service’s recent decisions to allow timbering in such sensitive areas should provide a wakeup call to the Obama administration, which will have to reconcile the Clinton-era roadless rule with eight years of generally pro-timbering policy positions under the Bush administration.

President Obama has yet to appoint a natural resources and environment undersecretary for the Department of Agriculture, a position which has direct policy control over the Forest Service. But advocacy groups remain hopeful the administration will appoint someone decidedly different from Mark Rey, who in seven years under the Bush administration alienated many in the conservation community.

“We hold out hope that there will be a change nationwide with respect to roadless areas in our national forests,” Matteson said, but added it may take weeks or months longer to change prevailing views and practices in White Mountain and some other areas where timbering remains a priority. “I think the leadership at the Forest Service was just very vested in continuing on this track, and they’re not going to change their tune until they get some clear direction from the national office.”

But other conservation groups, such as 108-year-old Society for

the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, are stepping up to defend the Forest Service’s management decisions.

In a Feb. 16 op-ed in the Concord Monitor newspaper, Forest Society President Jane Difley said groups such as the Sierra Club and CBD are fighting sustainable forestry practices to advance an agenda that calls for an end to all timbering in national forests.

“The White Mountain National Forest is 800,000 acres strong -- and makes up 14 percent of New Hampshire’s total land area. To remove it entirely from our inventory of working forest severely limits our ability to use that forest to generate local wood, renewable energy, carbon retention and, in the process, local jobs,” Difley said.

Meanwhile, logging has commenced in two other roadless areas in the White Mountain forest -- the Wild River and the South Carr Mountain areas. And last year, the service announced it would permit approximately 938 acres of timber harvesting in a fourth roadless area, known as Sandwich 4, that is adjacent to the Kancamagus National Scenic Byway and the Sandwich Range Wilderness.

Environmentalists are awaiting the Forest Service’s decision on their appeal of that timber sale.