

Environmentalists oppose White Mountain logging

Staff Report

RICHMOND — Representatives of a biodiversity center, joined by Sierra Club offices in Vermont and New Hampshire, have appealed a federal logging plan they say will threaten parts of the Kilkenney Roadless area in White Mountain National Forest north of Mount Washington.

The Mill Brook project, which has been proposed near the village of Stark, N.H., just north of Mount Washington, puts at risk not just the Kilkenney area, but national forest roadless areas around the country, according to Mollie Matteson, a conservation advocate at the Center For Biological Diversity in Richmond.

The federal Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which is better known as the Roadless Rule, was implemented eight years ago, as President Bill Clinton was leaving office.

Unlike down-to-the-wire rules that have been coming fast and furious out of the Bush administration, the Roadless Rule was in the making for years and had enormous popular support, according to representatives of the Center for Biological Diversity at its Northeast office in Richmond.

That particular rule prohibited road construction and logging in portions of the national forests that were still relatively free of development, she noted.

However, parts of the national forest were vulnerable to future logging and road projects. Since the Bush administration took office, the Roadless Rule has been under attack, leaving the fate of roadless areas in limbo.

“Roadless areas are islands of beauty, health, and peace — for wildlife and people — in a world that is rapidly losing such places,” Matteson said. “Logging in roadless areas is unacceptable and cannot continue,” she said.

Members of the conservation groups assert that the logging and road access proposed for the Kilkenney area, just north of Mount Washington, will diminish its remote, roadless qualities, Matteson said.

They also have the potential to disturb and fragment wildlife habitat, as well as threaten an outstanding wild brook-trout fishery, Matteson said.

So far, the U.S. Forest Service has not done a complete analysis of harm the project would cause by the generation of greenhouse gas

emissions and interactive effects of climate change and logging on the forest ecosystem, Matteson said.

“Our wild, unlogged forests serve a crucial function by absorbing and storing vast amounts of carbon, in wood and in the soil,” Matteson said.

Keeping forests intact and trees standing to soak up more carbon dioxide, “we buy ourselves a bit more time to reduce our carbon emissions from other sources,” she said.

The Kilkenney area is one of the largest and most isolated remaining roadless tracts in the eastern United States, in a part of New Hampshire where moose are more likely to be on the trails than hikers.

Once logged and burned over in the timber-baron era of the 19th century, the area’s forests have recovered, and today they harbor black bear, American marten, northern goshawk, and even the occasional Canada lynx, Matteson noted.

The U.S. Forest Service’s plans include destructive logging of roughly 300 acres of the Kilkenney Roadless Area, which the agency ranked as one of the best for finding solitude and remote, natural scenery.

According to the proposal posted on the Forest Service Web site, the project includes improving the flow of the Mill Brook to prevent flooding and protect the brook's watershed. The Forest Service will take an inventory of both current and abandoned roads and harvest about 1,000 acres of timber.

Katherine Stuart, U.S. Forest Service district ranger for the Androscoggin district, said the logging proposal is part of a long-term plan to maintain a diverse habitat that was approved in 2005 without objection. Open areas within a forest, such as meadows, fill in over time as trees take root and grow. As these young forest mature, the species that live there are pushed out. It is U.S. Forest Service policy to maintain some amount of cleared land to help open-space species thrive, said Stuart.

Stuart said there is nothing unusual about this project and it has the support of New Hampshire Fish and Game, other state agencies and Stark town leaders.

"We've had areas that have been harvested in the last 20 years that are in the (protected land)," Stuart said.

Stuart disagrees that the land is exempted from roads and logging.

"We've got our forest service policy but we've got courts sending us in different directions," Stuart said. "The Kilkenny area was added to the original roadless area in the White Mountains after the original rules changed. We felt like the (land) we added to it didn't fit under the original roadless area conservation rules."

The conservationists are hoping the U.S. Forest Service will follow the law and drop the project. However, if the agency doesn't, they are prepared to pursue legal protection.

"Ultimately, what's needed is a permanent, nationally consistent, and enforceable policy to protect all roadless areas," Matteson said. "We hope to see such policy enacted in the new Congress and under the next administration."

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national nonprofit conservation organization with 200,000 members and online activists who want to protect endangered species and wild places.

The appeal is now being reviewed by a team of forest ranger officers at the Eastern Region office and will be decided by Feb. 16.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.