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Groups challenge new Sierra logging rules

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Environmental groups accused the Bush administration in a lawsuit Tuesday of changing the rules for protection of threatened wildlife to promote logging in national forests that cover nearly 10 million acres in the Sierra.

Four conservation groups asked a federal judge in San Francisco to overturn a U.S. Forest Service decision in December that scaled back the agency's duty to monitor and protect designated species.

The animals and plants are considered "indicator species" that reflect the overall health of the forest. By law, the Forest Service must study the populations of each species and set goals to maintain the creatures and their habitats before considering tree cutting and road building in 10 national forests in the Sierra.

The new rules reduce the number of species to be monitored from 60 to 13 and allow the Forest Service to approve logging before studying any indicator species in the area, the suit said. Among those eliminated from the indicator list, environmental groups said, were the bighorn sheep, the Northern

goshawk and the endangered California condor.

That constituted "an attempt to increase logging of the Sierra's ancient forests at the expense of its wildlife," said Erin Tobin of the nonprofit legal group Earthjustice, which sued on behalf of Sierra Forest Legacy, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and Defenders of Wildlife. She said the Forest Service has invoked its new rules to try to dismiss lawsuits over logging in the forests.

The administration "eliminated an important safety net for Sierra forests and wildlife," said Craig Thomas of Sierra Forest Legacy.

John Heil, spokesman for the Forest Service's Southwest regional office in Vallejo, declined to comment on whether the agency was trying to increase logging, saying he could not discuss a pending lawsuit.

But he cited passages in the regional forester's Dec. 14 decision that said the Forest Service "assures wildlife sustainability through appropriate habitat management." The agency said it was trying to correct defects in previous practices.

One reason for reducing the number of indicator species to be monitored before reviewing logging plans is that some of the listed species, like the Sierra Nevada red fox and the great gray owl, are seldom found in the forests, the forester's decision said. Also, population changes for some species, including the peregrine falcon, largemouth bass and rainbow trout, "are not clearly related to habitat changes on national forest system land," the agency said.

The suit contended, however, that the decision represented a dramatic shift in Forest Service management of woodlands and increased the likelihood of harm to endangered creatures. The plaintiffs claimed that the Forest Service was violating environmental and endangered-species laws and challenged an agency study that concluded the change would have "no ecological effect."

This article appeared on page B - 4 of the San Francisco Chronicle