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Groups oppose White Mtn. logging

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) - Environmental groups have appealed a U.S. Forest Service decision to allow logging on 1,000 acres in the White Mountain National Forest, but forest service officials say the project will help the environment, not hurt it.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Vermont and New Hampshire chapters of the Sierra Club filed an appeal on Friday to halt the proposed Mill Brook project in Stark, N.H., just north of Mount Washington. The groups contend that building new roads and logging will disrupt some of the area's unique wildlife characteristics.

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 groups specifically object to proposed logging on 313 acres within the Kilkenny Inventoried Roadless Area. The federal government protected this land in 2005 as part of the national Roadless Area Conservation Rule. This rule protects large swaths of wilderness across the country by restricting road building, mining and logging, leaving the land solely for public recreation.

Former President Bill Clinton enacted the rule in the final days of office, but when President George Bush took over, he pushed to weaken the protections. Since then differing court decisions on the roadless rule have caused state-by-state confusion as to how it should be applied.

Forest Service officials say the proposed logging doesn't violate federal restrictions, but environmentalists say the roadless rule is clear - and has overwhelming public support.

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.

"We need to make folks aware of the clear cutting proposals in our White Mountains, that we need to be protecting our forest and that

there are more sustainable ways and more agreeable ways to log in the forest," said Catherine Corkery, spokeswoman for the New Hampshire chapter of the Sierra Club. She said there are other proposed projects to which the Sierra Club does not object, but because logging is taking place on protected land, the group wanted to take a stand.

Corkery said the Kilkenny area is home to goshawks, which are related to the eagle, and a unique species of mayfly. Mill Brook has wild brook trout and one of the largest brown trout populations outside of Maine.

"The logging and road building could affect the value of the fish and the wildlife and the geology and some of the other characteristics in the area," said Corkery.

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.

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),” said Stuart.

Corkery said just because the land was harvested in the past doesn’t mean it should be now.

“Almost all of the forest has been cut before. What is truly unique about the White Mountains is that since then these places haven’t been cut and they’ve been protected,” she said. “We feel there was a mandate from American citizens that the forest has to have protected areas that are roadless.”

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,” said Stuart. 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.”