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## OIL AND GAS: Los Padres leasing plan could face administrative, legal battles

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The federal government's plan to allow oil and gas leasing on 52,000 acres of Los Padres National Forest, including about 38,000 acres of roadless areas, could face challenges on both the administrative and legal fronts from environmentalists concerned the decision will harm the forest's 54 endangered California condors.

In announcing the decision last week, the Forest Service touted the plan's environmental benefits, noting that drilling will not be allowed in critical habitat for the California condor and surface development will be barred in the roadless portions of the 1.75 million-acre forest open to leasing. Companies leasing these areas would have to access the oil and gas resources through directional drilling from wells on adjacent land.

"I feel that it provides for the protection of ecological values that are so important to the American public, while still offering a portion of our oil and gas potential to the nation," said Forest Supervisor Gloria Brown in a statement.

Concerns about the condor The Fish and Wildlife Service began reintroducing captive-bred condors to the wild in 1992. Photo courtesy of FWS. Environmental groups applauded Brown's decision to protect the roadless areas and place serious restrictions on oil and gas development but criticized the move to open the national forest to more oil and gas development.

"We've spent \$38 million bringing the California condor back to this specific area of Los Padres, so it seems pretty foolish to open the area to new oil and gas development, especially for such a relatively small amount of oil," said Dan Smuts, deputy regional director of the Wilderness Society.

Monica Bond, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, noted that current oil and gas operations in Los Padres National Forest -- which include some 180 wells -- have already exacted a heavy toll on the birds, citing an incident a few years ago in which a male condor dipped his head into a pool of oil and then transferred the oil to a chick that later died.

"We have current oil and gas operations that are having major impacts to the biological resources and water resources of that area," Bond said. "They should be spending their limited funds addressing those impacts rather than adding to them."

Smuts and Bond said their organizations are considering challenging the leasing plan, both through the agency's appeals process as well as in the courts.

Al Hess, oil and gas resource specialist for the forest, said the Forest Service has developed measures to protect the condor from drilling activities.

These measures include placing all new powerlines underground, installing raptor guards and flight diverters on existing powerlines to prevent the birds from roosting on or colliding with them, covering liquid containers and keeping all well sites free of trash.

"They've been tried and found effective, and we're planning on continuing them with any new operations that might occur," Hess said.

### Plan details

Brown's decision does not permit actual drilling or other ground-disturbing activities unless the lands are subsequently leased through the Bureau of Land Management. And before any drilling could occur, the lessee would be required to submit a drilling plan that would be subject to environmental review and public comment.

The new acreage opened to leasing is along the forest's southern boundary in Ventura County and the south Cuyama Valley in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties. The Forest Service said the areas to be leased are located near existing oil operations in the forest, which has been producing oil and gas for more than a century.

Brown's decision makes 4,277 acres available for leasing with surface access; the rest can be developed only by slant drilling. If all 4,277 acres are leased, the Forest Service estimates that about 21 acres would be disturbed through the construction of well pads, drills, access roads and pipelines.

The Forest Service estimates the lease areas could produce 17 million barrels of oil equivalent, a combination of crude oil and natural gas that could be worth more than \$1 billion at today's oil prices of \$60 per barrel.

Drilling is not expected until late next year, at the earliest.

But drilling may not occur at all if some members of California's congressional delegation have their way. California Democrats Rep. Lois Capps, Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Sen. Barbara Boxer have introduced companion legislation in the House and Senate that would ban new oil and gas development in Los Padres.

Capps reiterated her commitment to protect Los Padres from new drilling in a statement released last week. "While I'm pleased the Forest Service stopped short of opening the entire forest to new oil and gas development, I still have many concerns about their final decision. The opening of these spectacular, unspoiled lands to oil and gas drilling threatens one of California's most pristine and wild places," Capps said.