

Santa Barbara Newsroom  
Environmental Groups Sue Forest Service  
Over Oil Drilling



Print this  
article



email this  
article

By Melinda Burns  
Tuesday, April 24 2007

Saying oil and nature don't mix, three environmentalist groups filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service on Monday to halt a plan that would open parts of Los Padres National Forest to new oil development.

The lawsuit by the Center for Biological Diversity, Los Padres ForestWatch and Defenders of Wildlife comes less than three months after an oil spill from a ruptured pipeline fouled the waters of Tar Creek near the Sespe Condor Sanctuary, north of Fillmore.



The condor, an endangered species, makes its home in the forest north of Fillmore and passes over the Sierra Madre on flights to and from Big Sur. Courtesy of ForestWatch

“It doesn't make sense that they're allowing oil drilling to expand in areas that are used by condors,” said Jeff Kuyper, the executive director of ForestWatch, a Santa Barbara-based nonprofit. “It's reckless to allow this level of oil development in such valuable habitat.”

Forest officials said Monday that 19 barrels of oil, or 800 gallons, were recovered from Tar Creek – about four times as much as the early estimates from the Jan. 29 spill.

Kathy Good, a Los Padres spokeswoman, declined to comment on the lawsuit Monday, but said that any new oil and gas development would be controlled so as to protect the condor.

Under pressure from the Bush administration to allow resource development on public lands, Los Padres officials decided in 2005 to open 52,000 undeveloped acres of the forest to oil and gas leasing. The plan restricts surface development, such as wells, pipelines, power lines and roads to 4,000 acres, primarily north of Cuyama in the Sierra Madre, and north of Fillmore, near the condor sanctuary and the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge.

The condor, an endangered species, makes its home in the forest north of Fillmore and passes over the Sierra Madre on flights to and from Big Sur. Federal agencies have expended millions of dollars trying to save the birds from extinction.

The environmentalists filed their lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Sacramento on Monday, alleging that the Forest Service failed to properly review the impacts of new oil development on the condor and other wildlife. They said the plan relied on outdated oil prices from 1993 for projecting future development in the forest. The price of oil has now doubled to more than \$60 per barrel, the critics said.

But Good said only 21 acres would likely be disturbed by new oil and gas development, even if all 52,000 acres were eventually leased. Under the plan, 48,000 acres can be reached only by horizontal or “slant” drilling underground.

No new oil leases are in the offing right now, Good said. The Los Padres and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management had planned to start leasing the new areas in August, she said, but they put everything on hold after the spill.

“There's nothing imminent, there's nothing planned,” Good said.

