

Tar and feathers

Los Padres ForestWatch sues the U.S. Forest Service to protect the condors and local forests from oil spills

~ By MAUREEN FOLEY ~



Oil and gas drilling expansion and issues related to the January Tar Creek oil spill in the Los Padres National Forest are creating a sticky situation for the United States Forest Service.

Last week, three conservation groups filed a lawsuit against the Forest Service “over its plans to expand oil and gas drilling in the Los Padres National Forest, following a devastating oil and wastewater spill” in January 2007, according to Los Padres ForestWatch (LPFW).

By filing the lawsuit, the group hopes to “protect our local forest from oil and gas drilling in ecologically sensitive areas and to prevent another oil spill,” said LPFW Executive Director Jeff Kuyper. LPFW contends that the Los Padres National Forest’s decision in July 2005 to open 52,075 acres of public land to oil and gas drilling violates the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Forest Management Act.

According to Kuyper, ForestWatch is concerned about the expansion of oil and gas drilling activities because of their effect on the immediate ecosystem. He also said more drilling could lead to an increased frequency in oil spills. The endangered California condor is especially at risk; approximately 50 to 60 live in the Los Padres forest.

“The federal government spent millions of dollars to bring [the condor] back from the brink. [We think it is] careless to have oil development so close to their habitat,” Kuyper said.

According to Kuyper, expanded oil drilling could be dangerous to condors because it increases the likelihood that they will come into contact with oil in the event of a spill or eat waste related to the industrial activities. In the past, some condors have already become “oiled” and others have been removed from the wild after ingesting trash, Kuyper said. The trash found around oil drilling sites, such as oily rags or bolts, could be dangerous if eaten by condors, Kuyper said.

Kuyper said he is also concerned about the added risk to condors from the “increased human activity” necessary to the oil and drilling expansion. This “has a high potential of disturbing the condor or making it more acclimated to human activities. That can cause a host of problems,” Kuyper said.

LPFW, along with national groups the Center for Biological Diversity and the Defenders of Wildlife, announced the lawsuit on April 23. A court date has not been set, but Kuyper expects to go to trial as soon as late summer or fall 2007.

Kathy Good, Public Affairs Officer for the Los Padres National Forest, said she could not comment on the ongoing lawsuit, but did say there have been some updates related to the Tar Creek oil spill.

The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG), the organization overseeing the oil spill cleanup, is planning to release a report on the spill in late May or early June, Good said. While the report is not final, Good said that according to DFG, no mammals were affected by the spill and that primarily insects and some amphibians were killed. “There was no affect on condors or steelhead [trout],” Good said.

Good also said the amount of oil spilled was found to be more than first reported. “They are now estimating that ... 19 barrels, approximately, were recovered [from the spill],” the equivalent of 589 gallons of oil, Good said.

LPFW, however, claims there may have been over 25 barrels (or 800 gallons) spilled at Tar Creek.

According to the LPFW Web site, “ForestWatch was founded in 2004 and has expanded into a powerful advocate for our public lands. Today, we’re leading the charge to protect and restore the forests, grasslands, rivers, wildlife, and wilderness along California’s Central Coast.” For more information, visit www.lpfw.org.

