

Groups sue to block more forest drilling

By Zeke Barlow

Three environmental groups have filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service in an attempt to stop additional oil drilling in the Los Padres National Forests.

The suit comes after an incident in January in which more than 19 barrels of oil spilled into the forest from a drill site on private land. The oil ultimately trickled into Tar Creek.

It demonstrated how incompatible oil is to our local forests,” said Jeff Kuyper, executive director of Los Padres ForestWatch. His group, along with Defenders of Wildlife and the Center for Biological Diversity, filed the suit Monday in U.S. District Court for the eastern district of California.

The Forest Service does not comment on ongoing litigation, said spokeswoman Kathy Good.

The suit claims that proposed drilling violates the National Environmental Policy Act because it doesn’t take into account how

more drilling could lead to more spills. The suit states spills harm wildlife and the drilling should not be permitted.

Kuyper’s group is looking into how many spills there have been in the forest and how they may affect the environment.

A final assessment of the damage from the January spill is expected in coming months. Initial reports suggested although a few animals were covered with oil, no endangered species were hurt, Good said.

In 2005, the Forest Service approved about 48,000 acres in the Los Padres to be open to slant drilling, where the drilling starts on private property or existing drill sites and moves underground onto Forest Service property.

An additional 4,200 acres are available to lease, which could have infrastructure placed on the land. But Good said in reality, the machines would only cover about 21 acres.

The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management still have to offer up leases and if any are sold, the proposals would undergo environmental review.