

<http://www.dailytidings.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091005/NEWS02/910050312>

Roadless rule roadblock

City's watershed thinning plan tangled in controversy



By [Vickie Aldous](#)

Ashland Daily Tidings

October 05, 2009

Federal economic stimulus money totaling \$2 million has been earmarked for a wildfire fuels thinning project in the Ashland Watershed, but the project is in limbo because of a nationwide controversy over what activities will be allowed in roadless areas.

The McDonald Peak Roadless Area makes up part of the Ashland Watershed, which is overgrown with flammable trees and brush after decades of wildfire suppression.

Local community members worked with the U.S. Forest Service to help devise the Ashland Forest Resiliency plan to thin 7,600 acres of Forest Service land in the watershed, the primary source of Ashland's drinking water.

About 1,045 acres of the project is in the McDonald Peak Roadless Area, said Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest Public Affairs Officer Patty Burel.

The proper extent of activities in roadless areas across America has long been a contentious issue. During his time in office, President Bill Clinton took action in 2001 to block some types of development, road-building and logging in the areas.

Legal battles ensued, with conflicting court decisions both upholding Clinton's roadless rule and blocking the Forest Service from carrying out the rule.

President Barack Obama's administration is seeking to lift a court injunction against carrying out the roadless rule.

Meanwhile, Obama's Secretary of Agriculture, former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack, issued an interim directive in May that all forest management or road-building proposals in roadless areas must come to him for a decision on whether they can proceed.

The Forest Service is part of the Department of Agriculture.

With projects across American awaiting review and Vilsack's approval, Forest Service officials said they don't know when there will be a decision about the Ashland Forest Resiliency plan.

The Ashland plan has to go through the Forest Service's regional office and then on to Vilsack. No timeline for the project's approval is known, said Tom Knappenberger, who works for the Forest Service's media desk in Portland.

Vilsack's views

There are indications that Vilsack could have a positive view of projects like the Ashland Forest Resiliency plan. In an August speech in Seattle, Vilsack voiced support for forest restoration projects on Forest Service land.

"Restoring forest ecosystems, particularly in fire-adapted forests, will make our forests more resilient to climate-induced stresses and will ensure that our forests will continue to provide ample, abundant clean water," he said.

Vilsack also advocated more Forest Service cooperation with local communities.

"Litigation and conflict should become less prevalent because they can be viewed as less necessary. Now, fortunately, this process has begun. In many regions today, the Forest Service is already charting a path forward by building trust through diverse stakeholders through collaboration and engagement," he said.

Vilsack stressed the need to protect roadless areas.

One possibility for expediting the Ashland Forest Resiliency project would be to drop plans for treatments in the McDonald Peak Roadless Area.

The Forest Service has not made a decision about that step, Burel said.

"We are in consultation with the higher levels of the Forest Service, and this has not yet been resolved," she said.

Jay Lininger, a former Ashland resident who is now an ecologist for the **Center for Biological Diversity** in Tuscon, Ariz., was one of many residents who helped co-author a community watershed treatment plan that the Forest Service drew from to create the Ashland Forest Resiliency Plan.

Lininger said treatments in the McDonald Peak Roadless Area, which is located high in the watershed, are less important than treatments close to Ashland, where human-caused fires can burn uphill into the watershed.

"Ridge-line cuttings in the roadless area are holding up the entire project because the Forest Service refuses to separate out the roadless portion," he said.

The Siskiyou Fire that started on Sept. 21 and burned 149 acres and a home in southeast Ashland was human-caused, Oregon Department of Forestry officials have said.

The actions of firefighters from numerous fire departments and agencies stopped the fire from destroying more homes or burning up into the watershed.

Lininger said he believes that lightning-caused fires could even be allowed to burn in the roadless area to help restore the watershed to a more natural condition.

However, the Mt. Ashland Ski and Snowboard Resort is adjacent to the roadless area.

Money for project

In addition to \$2 million in federal stimulus money that has been awarded for the Ashland Forest Resiliency project, The Nature Conservancy won a \$43,600 National Forest Foundation grant so that conservation groups, the city of Ashland and other groups and individuals could monitor the treatment project.

Monitoring allows people to see if the treatments are having the desired effects. If the work is not proceeding according to plan, or is causing harmful impacts, the project can be modified, according to Ashland Fire & Rescue Forest Resource Specialist Chris Chambers, who was also involved in creating the community treatment plan.

In a Sept. 9 announcement of the \$2 million federal stimulus spending award, Forest Service officials said the Ashland Forest Resiliency Project would reduce flammable materials, protect natural resources and homes and make the ecosystem more resilient to wildfires.

"At the same time, the project provides jobs for equipment operators, thinning crews, and truck drivers in an area hard-hit by the downturn in the wood products industries," the announcement said.

The total cost of the multi-year Ashland Forest Resiliency project is not known yet, Burel said.

Staff writer Vickie Aldous can be reached at 479-8199 or vlaldous@yahoo.com.