

North County Times

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National forest plans unveiled; tries to strike balance between demands, environmental protection

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

Federal officials unveiled management plans for Southern California's national forests Friday that open one-fourth of the roadless areas to motorized recreation, add 87,000 acres of protected wilderness and left the door open to a Lake Elsinore hydroelectric plant.

The lengthy documents, essentially zoning plans for the Cleveland, San Bernardino, Angeles and Los Padres forests, will guide activities in 3.5 million acres of the Southern California back country for the next 10 to 15 years.

In approving the plans, Pacific Southwest Regional Forester Bernie Weingardt said in a letter: "My decision strikes a reasonable balance between the sustainability of the national forest and the complex demands expressed by a wide variety of people, groups and organizations." Weingardt said the plans were shaped by the more than 18,000 comments the U.S. Forest Service received on the future direction of managing remaining wildlands in one of the world's most heavily urbanized regions.

John Stewart, natural resources consultant for the California Association of Four-Wheel-Drive Clubs in San Diego, welcomed the long-awaited release of plans that will replace ones in effect since the late 1980s, and said on the surface it appears off-roaders got a fair shake.

"There is cautious optimism that things are going to work out in a favorable light," Stewart said.

Now, he said, four-wheel-drive and all-terrain-vehicle groups will turn their attention to lobbying the Forest Service to designate a network of roads and trails for off-road use.

Environmentalists immediately denounced the plans, saying that opening backwoods areas to off-roading threatens to degrade the forests and endanger rare species of plants and animals.

"Southern Californian forests are world-class biologically diverse hot spots for plants," said Monica Bond, a biologist with the environmental group Center for Biological Diversity in Riverside County. "It's like an ecological treasure trove of plants."

Bond cited Elsinore Peak near the city of Lake Elsinore as a place where she believes the plan leaves plants unprotected.

Bond also criticized the decision to open one-quarter of trails and roads that have been off limits to off-road recreation. Many of the new trails are ones vehicles carved into the landscape by going where they weren't supposed to, prompting Bond to suggest the Forest Service was rewarding off-roaders for illegal back-country riding.

"This plan is opening the door for increased off-road vehicle use. It's opening the door for additional damage when they haven't even taken a hard look at the existing damage that is occurring," Bond said. "It's just a big letdown."

Joan Wynn, a spokeswoman for the Cleveland forest in Rancho Bernardo, countered that the service concluded after extensive study that the move will accommodate the swelling demand for recreation while not harming the environment.

Environmentalists said they were upset about the service's rejection of an earlier recommendation to create 1,500 acres of wilderness in Morrell Canyon, next to the existing San Mateo Canyon Wilderness south of the Ortega Highway (Highway 74).

In the final analysis, no new wilderness is being created there, and the new "back country motorized use restricted" zoning would allow vehicle access and does not appear to foreclose the possibility of a

hydroelectric plant being built there.

The Nevada Hydro Co. of Vista and the Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District are seeking approval from various agencies to build a 500-megawatt power plant using Lake Elsinore and a proposed new reservoir uphill in Morrell Canyon. Nevada Hydro also has proposed stringing power lines through the forest to link the plant with San Diego County's electric grid.

Peter Lewandowski, president of Nevada Hydro, observed that "the plan could have included language that would have been less favorable to our project. We remain guardedly optimistic. We have yet to analyze and absorb exactly what the plan says about our project."

Bill Corcoran, Sierra Club regional representative in Los Angeles, termed the decision not to designate wilderness there a "significant retreat from defending that popular hiking area. It is an oak-filled canyon with a stream, which is an extremely rare type of place on that part of the Cleveland."

Corcoran also lamented the decision not to designate Sitton Peak along the western or Orange County side of the Santa Ana Mountains, north of Lake Elsinore. He said creating wilderness there would have made it difficult for transportation officials to pave a new highway across the forest connecting Riverside and Orange counties, something environmental groups oppose.

Overall, the final plan called for asking Congress to designate 11,377 acres of new wilderness in the Cleveland National Forest, down from the recommended 16,415 acres in the draft plan that came out in 2004. The forest has 75,444 acres of existing wilderness.

One addition would expand the 16,000-acre Agua Tibia Wilderness southeast of Temecula to nearly 20,000 acres, by pulling in Cutca Valley to the east.

The plan also calls for bestowing protective "wild and scenic river" designation on the San Luis Rey River in North San Diego County and San Mateo Creek in Southwest Riverside County.

Forest Management Plans

The U.S. Forest Service has scheduled several public meetings to explain the new management plans for Southern California's national forests. Following are meetings in Riverside County and San Diego County.

Cleveland National Forest

- Escondido: Oct. 12, 6 to 8:30 p.m., East Valley Community Center, 2245 E. Valley Parkway
- Ramona: Oct. 18, 6 to 8:30 p.m., Ramona Community Center, 434 Aqua Lane
- San Diego: Oct. 21, 6 to 8:30 p.m., Balboa Park Club, 2150 Pan-American Road West
- Corona: Oct. 27, 6 to 8:30 p.m., Corona Public Library, 650 S. Main St.

San Bernardino National Forest

- Idyllwild: Nov. 1, 6 to 8 p.m., Idyllwild Elementary School, multipurpose room, 26700 Highway 243.