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New report needed for thinning of Kaibab trees

By Mary Jo Pitzl
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Forest officials are going back to the drawing board to support their plans to thin the Kaibab National Forest near Jacob Lake.

The agency will prepare an environmental-impact statement on the Jacob Ryan project, a plan to thin trees on 30,000 acres of forest, supervisor Mike Williams said this week.

The statement should be the fastest way to get the project moving, Williams said, since it only has to outline potential positive and negative impacts of the project.

An attempt earlier this year to justify the project through a different process foundered when environmental groups successfully appealed those parts of the plan involving soil runoff and protection of "view corridors."

The environmental-impact statement will address those concerns but, unlike the first proposal, will not be required to justify why tree cutting would have "no significant impact" on the environment, Williams said.

Environmentalists who contested the first project lamented the announcement.

"They're going to be spending a lot of money on this project that should be spent on protecting people's homes," said Erik Ryberg, Southwest public lands specialist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The center was one of several groups that appealed the initial project.

At issue is the forest service's interest in cutting trees that are 16 inches in diameter or bigger.

Williams said the project would remove far more smaller trees than large ones, and the service doesn't want to be limited by what it believes is an arbitrary "cap" on tree diameter. Specifically, there are some large trees along U.S. 89 and Arizona 67 that should be removed for safety reasons.

Ryberg said the 16-inch limit is designed to protect bigger trees that, if allowed to continue growing, will become the old-growth forest of tomorrow.

The environmental-impact statement should cause only a four- to six-month delay in the project, Williams said.

However, given the dispute over the Jacob Ryan project to date, both sides say another round of appeals is likely.