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Oil leasing terms for Los Padres National Forest announced

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LOS ANGELES_Los Padres National Forest will allow companies to drill for an estimated 17 million barrels of crude oil or natural gas within its borders but roadless wilderness areas and critical habitat of the California condor will be preserved, forest officials announced Thursday.

Forest Supervisor Gloria Brown will allow oil and gas leasing on only 52,000 out of 767,000 acres of land that were included in a decade-long study of Los Padres, a nearly 2 million-acre forest that spans 220 miles from Big Sur in Monterey County south to near western Los Angeles County.

On all but 4,277 acres, leases would have a "no surface occupancy" stipulation that would forbid development on the site, including wells, roads or power lines. Instead, companies would have to drill in from adjacent national forest or private lands where oil fields already exist, the U.S. Forest Service said in a statement.

If all of the available acres are leased, about 25 wells could be drilled, producing 17 million barrels of oil or the equivalent in natural gas, forest officials estimated.

Leases would have to be granted through the Bureau of Land Management and undergo environmental review, forest officials said.

Off limits would be most of the half-mil-

lion acres of wilderness that do not currently have roads and also important habitat for the endangered California condor.

"I feel that it provides for the protection of ecological values that are so important to the American public, while still offering a portion of our oil and gas potential to the nation," Brown said in a statement.

The decision met with a mixed reaction from the local congresswoman.

"While I'm pleased the Forest Service stopped short of opening the entire forest to new oil and gas development, I still have many concerns," Rep. Lois Capps, D-Santa Barbara, said in a statement.

"The opening of these spectacular, unspoiled lands to oil and gas drilling threatens one of California's most pristine and wild places."

"The potential damage from new drilling is far too great a risk for a marginal, insignificant amount of oil," said Capps, who recently introduced a bill in the House to permanently ban new oil and gas development in Los Padres.

Conservation groups who have long tracked the forest study also were unhappy.

"We're really concerned and we're certainly looking into the possibility of legally challenging this," said Monica Bond, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity in San Francisco.

"It's still a serious impact on very fragile areas," she said.

Some of the land to be opened for leasing is adjacent to the Sespe Condor Sanctuary and a wildlife refuge, said Jeff Kuyper, executive director of Los Padres ForestWatch.

"The Forest Service should be thinking of ways to reduce the existing impacts," from current drilling, he said.

Any oil or gas drilling on national forest land is "shameful," said Erin Duffy Zellet, coordinator of the Los Padres chapter of the Sierra Club.

While designated condor habitat will be safe, the birds effectively make the entire forest their home and "any kind of machinery that goes into the forest increases the risk for fire," she said.

"We spent millions and millions of dollars on the condor restoration program and to risk it for a few days of oil at our current consumption rate, I don't see the point," she said.

At the same time, Zellet said she was pleased that no leases will be allowed in 93 percent of the roadless wilderness areas.

"I am feeling like we have a small victory. We didn't win the war," she said.