

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

July 28, 2005

Oil leasing for national forest announced

The Associated Press

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, forest officials announced Thursday.

Roadless wilderness areas and habitat for the endangered California condor will be preserved, officials said. However, conservation groups raised concerns and at least one said it was considering taking legal action to stop the plan from going forward.

Oil and gas leasing will be allowed 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 north of Los Angeles.

"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," Forest Supervisor Gloria Brown said.

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

"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," said state

Rep. Lois Capps, a Democrat from Santa Barbara.

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

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.