

Appeal says region forest plan increases fire danger

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Environmental groups planned to file a challenge today to the blueprint guiding the four national forests in Southern California, arguing it lacks teeth to protect trees, soil and wildlife and might increase the scale of fires.

Coming on the heels of a similar appeal by Gov. Schwarzenegger's administration last week, the groups say the U.S. Forest Service's 15-year management plan for the San Bernardino, Cleveland, Angeles and Los Padres national forests will harm rather than help sustain their natural resources.

The plan, they said, paves the way for construction of more roads and a hydroelectric plant in the Cleveland that could flood a pristine canyon.

"They're increasing the activities they know are causing damage," said Monica Bond, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. The group, based in Joshua Tree, planned to file the appeal along with the Sierra Club and seven other groups.

Matt Mathes, a regional Forest Service spokesman, said officials struggled to balance competing uses in the heavily used forests when they issued their final plan last September.

Forest Chief Dale Bosworth in Washington, D.C., will review the administrative appeals that make the Thursday postmark deadline and decide whether the forest managers should make any changes, Mathes said. Groups can file lawsuits if they aren't satisfied.

At issue in the appeal filed by the California Resources Agency and by the environmental groups is the allowance of road-building in areas that are roadless.

Bond said roads create more erosion and alter the way rain and snow drain from the mountains into creeks, which are key drinking-water sources for Inland residents.



AP photo

Protections for the California spotted owl are weak under a 15-year management plan for Southern California national forests, environmental groups allege.

Roads allow invasive weeds to be carried deep into the forest by vehicle tires, where the weeds can contribute to the spread of fires, she said.

"It's well known that roads are corridors to spreading invasive species," Bond said. "If they want to get serious about fire management, they should consider protecting roadless areas."

Mathes said the plan opens about 25 percent of roadless areas to limited off-roading and firefighting routes.

"What we're attempting to do is close user-created routes and replacing that spaghetti-like network with one well-constructed loop trail that will take care of the (recreational) demand," he said.

The plan also zoned part of the Cleveland National Forest to allow a hydroelectric plant to flood Morrell Canyon, the appeal said, although Mathes said the project must undergo an environmental review first.

Chris Wysocki, a spokesman for Nevada Hydro Co., a project proponent, said Morrell Canyon wouldn't necessarily be used. It is one of two possible sites to store water that would run downhill to generate electricity.

Owls at Risk?

According to the appeal, protections for the California spotted owl, a species on the decline, are weak under the plan, and it allows too many trees to be cut down for forest thinning.

Mathes disagreed, saying officials understand the forest can be the last refuge for imperiled species in fast-growing Southern California.

"We've successfully kept the owl off the threatened and endangered list for 15 years," he said. "We fully intend to keep doing that."

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