



WEDNESDAY
February 2, 2005

State, enviros sue to block Sierra national forest plan

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) - California's attorney general joined environmental groups Tuesday in suing the federal government to block its plan to manage 11.5 million acres of Sierra Nevada national forest. The suits argue there is no scientific justification for the U.S. Forest Service decision to boost logging and make other changes to a plan previously approved in the waning days of the Clinton administration.

"Their plan will increase harvesting between 470 percent (in the first decade of the plan) and 640 percent (in the second decade). I think that's their goal," Attorney General Bill Lockyer alleged.

Lockyer and several scientists, in a teleconference with reporters, took particular exception to allowing cutting of trees up to 30 inches in diameter. There is no scientific justification for cutting larger, more fire-resistant trees that provide key wildlife habitat, said the scientists and Jim Lyons, former President Clinton's agriculture undersecretary and now a professor at Yale University.

"We have scientists on our side, too," who reviewed the plan, countered Forest Service spokesman Matt Mathes. "There is no black-and-white science in the Sierra Nevada," so the plan calls for monitoring projects and making changes if necessary.

Larger trees, Mathes said, aren't a fire hazard but harvesting them helps pay to clear out the smaller brush and trees that are a problem. "There's not enough money in the federal treasury to thin hundreds of

thousands, millions of acres."

Including a few larger trees in those cuts would help entice timber companies to also clean out smaller, commercially worthless material that makes the forest vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires, he said.

The California Forestry Association sued Dec. 10, arguing the Forest Service should have included a sustainable timber supply as one of the goals.

But association President Dave Bischell criticized the suits by Lockyer and environmental groups including the Sierra Nevada Forest Protection Campaign, Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Center for Biological Diversity and The Wilderness Society.

The Forest Service has properly demonstrated it needs to use "the whole suite of tools" to fight fire danger, Bischell said. The agency's plan calls for cutting less than 1 percent of the larger trees over the next decade, he said.

Agriculture Undersecretary Mark Rey had until last Friday to review the plan, but his office said any announcement of changes or revisions is still pending. He is named in the lawsuits along with the Forest Service and its chief and regional forester.

"Because he missed his deadline, in effect the administrative review process is complete" and opponents are free to sue, said Lockyer spokesman Tom Dresslar.

Both suits were filed in Sacramento federal court. Neither asks a judge to immediately prevent the Forest Service from acting under the revised Sierra plan.