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FORESTS: Judge halts timber sale in Alaska roadless area (Greenwire, 12/09/2009)

Noelle Straub, E&E reporter

A federal judge has halted a timber sale in a roadless area of Alaska's Tongass National Forest that had been greenlighted by the Obama administration earlier this year.

U.S. District Judge John Sedwick ruled that the Forest Service must re-evaluate the sale due to changing economic conditions that have greatly reduced the revenue the proposed sale would bring.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack in July had approved the Orion North sale, the first logging allowed in an area covered by the 2001 roadless rule since the secretary took personal responsibility for such decisions earlier this year. Environmental groups had filed a lawsuit in March challenging the proposed sale, which would allow Pacific Log and Lumber to harvest about 4.4 million board feet of timber.

The sale also would involve almost 5 miles of new road construction, nearly 2 miles of road reconstruction and 1 mile of temporary road building.

Sedwick ruled that new information from the environmental groups shows that the costs to the public of the timber sale are significantly higher and the returns to the federal government are "very significantly lower" than anticipated. The groups contend the sale would cost taxpayers nearly \$1.6 million to build roads into the national forest and bring in about \$141,000 for the trees.

Sedwick said the court injunction will "protect public resources just long enough to allow time for the preparation" of a supplemental environmental impact statement.

The original environmental analysis was issued in 1999, when the sale was first authorized.

The judge rejected the groups' arguments that the government failed to consider new information on deer habitat, wolf viability, invasive species and climate change effects on yellow cedar.

The groups include the Tongass Conservation Society, the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Center for Biological Diversity, Greenpeace and the Cascadia Wildlands Project.

"The court's ruling recognizes that timber sales like this one in a roadless area of the Tongass are a waste of taxpayer money," Kate Glover of Earthjustice Alaska said in a statement. "This decision protects one of the last pristine areas in the Throne Arm; the trees have more value standing than cut down."

When Vilsack approved the sale in July, department officials noted it was first offered before the Clinton roadless rule was adopted in 2001. They also said the Forest Service had judged that the sale was critical to keep a local timber mill open and to protect jobs there (*E&ENews PM*, July 20).

The department did not answer requests for comment by deadline.

The roadless rule granted blanket protection to about 58 million acres of national forests nationwide but has been mired in legal battles ever since President Clinton put it in place just before leaving office.

In May, Vilsack signed a directive giving himself sole power to make decisions for one year on building roads and harvesting timber on nearly all of the areas covered by the 2001 rule. No project will proceed without his personal approval while the Obama administration decides how to handle the roadless rule.

Click here to read the court ruling.