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USFS Announces Protection Agreement

Source: Los Padres ForestWatch

The Los Padres National Forest will benefit from an agreement announced late yesterday between conservationists, the state of California, off-road vehicle users and the U.S. Forest Service to protect more than 600,000 acres of roadless areas in Santa Barbara, Ventura, San Luis Obispo, and Kern counties from development. The agreement is awaiting approval by federal district court Judge Marilyn Hall Patel.

"Today's agreement brings us one step closer towards securing the permanent protection of our region's wild places," said Jeff Kuyper, executive director of Los Padres ForestWatch, a Santa Barbara-based conservation organization that participated in the agreement. "It promotes healthy wildlife populations, pristine open spaces, clean water, and outdoor recreation opportunities for our local communities, all of which are facing increasing pressures from urbanization and development."

The deal concludes a federal lawsuit brought by ForestWatch and other conservation groups challenging Forest Service management plans for four Southern California national forests. The challenged plans opened up 900,000 roadless acres for possible road building or other development across the four forests. In 2009 a federal district court agreed with the groups, ruling that the plans violated the National Environmental Policy Act. After that ruling was issued, the parties agreed to negotiate a settlement.

Under the agreement, various agencies and organizations will work together to improve and protect the roadless areas. Specific terms of the agreement include:

§ By December 2012, the Forest Service will complete a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) in which they will propose rezoning 37 priority roadless areas as Recommended Wilderness.

§ Until the agency completes the SEIS, all roadless areas will be protected from harmful activities.

§ The agencies and groups will work together to identify illegal roads and trails that are degrading roadless areas, and the Forest Service will prioritize these roads for decommissioning and restoration by July 2011.

§ The Forest Service will identify and apply for federal, state, and private sources of funding to carry out priority decommissioning and restoration projects in the four forests.

§ The Forest Service will increase public disclosure about which proposed development activities will affect roadless areas.

§ The Forest Service will evaluate ways to improve how it monitors the impacts of land uses on the national forests. The Forest Service will summarize the results of its monitoring in a report made available to the public each year.

The environmental groups in the suit are the Center for Biological Diversity, Los Padres ForestWatch, Sierra Club, Defenders of Wildlife, California Native Plant Society, California Wilderness Coalition and The Wilderness Society, all represented by Earthjustice attorneys Erin Tobin and Trent Orr.

"Under this agreement some of the most wild and pristine areas of Southern California's national forests will be better protected from potential damage," said Ileene Anderson, a Center for Biological Diversity biologist. "These areas provide critically important strongholds for endangered species such as steelhead, California condors and arroyo toad."

Earthjustice attorney Erin Tobin said, "Southern Californians need and want wild areas, wildlife, healthy forests and clean drinking water. That's what these national forests have to offer and they will be better protected going forward because of the agreement we've reached."

Kim Delfino, the California program director for Defenders of Wildlife said, "California's national forests are some of the last remaining wild places in our state, and smart planning is essential to protecting the forests' resources, especially vital wildlife habitat."

"John Muir called for the protection of all wild places," said Joyce Burk of the Sierra Club's Southern California Forests Committee. "We are a step closer to protecting some of Southern California's wild places with this agreement."

"As the Southern California population pushes past 15 million, wild lands are even more critical to the region because they provide drinking water, clean air and outdoor recreation," said Annette Kondo, spokeswoman for The Wilderness Society's California office. "Any additional wilderness will be a life-enhancing gift for future families."

Background

The Forest Service updated its land management plans for the four national forests in 2005. The revised plans largely ignored an alternative developed by a coalition of conservation groups that would have safeguarded the forests' unique biological diversity. In 2008, seven groups filed suit over this and several other flaws in the plans.

The four national forests of southern California include more than 3.5 million acres of public land from Big Sur to the Mexican border. The forests host a high diversity of ecosystems, including

chaparral, oak woodlands, savannas, deserts and alpine areas. Habitat for sensitive, threatened and endangered animals is significantly affected by poorly managed roads, increasing demands for motorized recreation from the growing populations in Los Angeles and San Diego, oil and gas development, urban infrastructure, and other developmental pressures.

The Los Padres National Forest encompasses nearly 2 million acres in the coastal mountains of central California, stretching from the Big Sur coast to the western edge of Los Angeles County. The Angeles, near Los Angeles, contains 663,000 acres. The San Bernardino includes 665,700 acres and abuts the Inland Empire. The Cleveland includes 420,000 acres in Orange and San Diego counties. Many wildlife habitats will be protected by the new plans, including the arroyo toad, California condor, California red-legged frog, California spotted owl, least Bell's vireo, northern goshawk, mountain yellow-legged frog, southern California steelhead trout, and southwestern willow flycatcher.