

Group challenges restoration project

by Jim Kalvelage

A large forest thinning project planned for northwest of Ruidoso over the coming years is being challenged.

On Tuesday, the Center for Biological Diversity filed an administrative appeal with the U.S. Forest Service over the planned 11,610-acre Bonito Forest Restoration Project. The initiative, which received an approval from Lincoln National Forest Supervisor Robert Trujillo in July, would use prescribed burning and thinning through possible timber harvesting.

The environmental group argued the Bonito project would remove more forest canopy than is allowed by Forest Service rules that protects goshawk and Mexican spotted owl habitat. The group also contends the project would violate the National Forest Management Act.

"We support active management to restore forests and protect communities," said Jay Lininger, an ecologist with the center. "But in this case the Forest Service wants to log many of the last remaining large trees in violation of its own rules. Logging large trees damages wildlife habitat, harms rather than helps forests, and increases rather than decreases fire hazards to the community."

The Forest Service had said the Bonito treatments would favor and enhance retention of larger healthy trees with a representation of smaller trees in a variable-density, patchy pattern.

Of three major forest thinning projects approved by the Lincoln National Forest in recent years, the Bonito project is the only one that drew an environmental appeal.

"In other projects the Forest Service agreed to keep large trees standing because their removal worsens fire behavior," Lininger said. "This time, foresters were trying to appease politicians who are pressuring them."

Southern New Mexico's U.S. Representative Steve Pearce (R-Hobbs) has complained that environmental litigation and endangered species protections have halted logging on the Lincoln National Forest. Pearce has a bill pending in Congress that he has said is needed "to restart jobs in the timber industry by providing for the protection of the Mexican spotted owl in sanctuaries."

In March, Pearce said creating sanctuaries for the owls would open the Lincoln National Forest again to timber harvesting.

"It is time to take a commonsense approach to this issue, ignoring special interests," he said.

But Lininger said appeals and litigation over Lincoln National Forest projects are rare. He said timber sales continue to meet market demand. George Ellinger, owner of Ellinger Logging in Alamogordo, told the Alamogordo Daily News on April 24 that Pearce is misinformed.

"There's a misconception that there's no logging going on," Ellinger said. "Pearce came down and did a big talk with everybody, but he's not talking to anybody who knows anything."

In a letter to stakeholders after approving the Bonito Forest Restoration Project, Trujillo said the thinning would protect and enhance the watershed, recreational and forest health resources, and decrease the potential for high-intensity wildfires. He also said the project would improve wildlife habitat. And Trujillo said the work would provide employment to the region through fuel wood and timber harvests.

Pearce, meanwhile, has said he will participate in an emergency tree cutting project planned by Otero County on Sept. 17. Cutting will take place on one-acre of the Lincoln National Forest near Cloudcroft.

"It has been an uphill battle to begin logging again in New Mexico but Sept. 17 will mark the beginning of increase public safety and local environmental resource management," Pearce said. "I commend Otero County commissioners for their effort to protect local watersheds and prevent fires that have threatened Cloudcroft for many years."

Earlier this year Otero County Commissioner Ronny Rardin spearheaded an effort for the county to manage part of the national forest and thin tree stands.