



Sagebrush rebellion flares up in New Mexico

Illegal logging planned by Otero County to highlight quest for local control of federal lands

by Bob Berwyn

SUMMIT COUNTY - A New Mexico congressman is inciting residents of his district and state to violate federal laws by ignoring Forest Service regulations on motorized travel and encouraging local communities to cut trees on federal land without required permits and environmental studies.

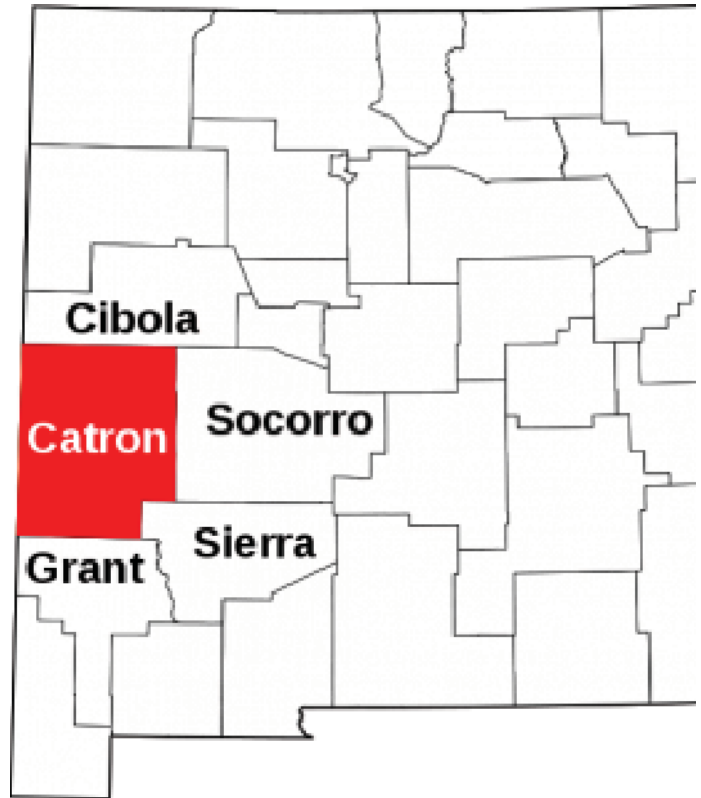
Additionally, Sierra County Sheriff Joe Baca, Jr., publicly (on a Facebook page) threatened to arrest federal employees if they try to close national forest roads pursuant to Forest Service regulations (see the Facebook thread at the end of the story).

U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce (R-N.M.) is leading yet another version of a sagebrush rebellion against the federal government, resulting what is being described by environmental groups as vigilante destruction of public lands.

The Center for Biological Diversity says Catron County bulldozed 13 miles of the San Francisco River in Catron County, and violated private property rights in the process. The southeastern New Mexico county has long been a hotbed of anti-federal sentiment. The river is designated critical habitat for the endangered loach minnow; the bulldozed section includes an inventoried roadless area downstream of Reserve.

In a press release dated Aug. 3, 2011, seven days before the bulldozing incident, Pearce highlighted the fact that sheriffs in counties that patrol the Gila will not enforce roadless rules or the Forest Service's travel management plan, which manages off-road vehicle use.

"If the Forest Service goes forward with their Travel Management Plan, then my deputies will not be out



Catron County, New Mexico

there keeping people off the roads," said Sierra County Sheriff Joe Baca. "I will send back the \$16,000 I'm given for forest patrols. I have better things to do — preventing real crimes — than keeping people out of the forest."

The only federal response from the Obama administration has been a multi-agency tour of the area and a letter from the Forest Service to the county.

"Public and elected officials should not be encouraging or engaging in vigilantism on private and federal public lands," said Cyndi Tuell at the Center for Biological Diversity. "This radical anti-environmental agenda is as dangerous and misinformed as it is out of touch with Americans' public-lands values."



A section of the bulldozing done by Catron County near the San Francisco River. PHOTO COURTESY CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY.

At an August town hall in Eager, Ariz., Congressman Pearce urged counties to take control of all the land within their boundaries, including federal public land.

On Sept. 17 Pearce and Otero County officials plan to log an acre of national forest land without federal permits as a protest against Forest Service environmental regulations.

The Otero County Commission voted in June to create an emergency forest plan, allowing the county to forego U.S. Forest Service policy and cut trees in the event of an emergency. They created an 80,000-acre plan that calls for responsible management to protect local watershed and prevent fires that have threatened Cloudcroft for many years.

Otero County Commissioner Ronny Rardin has spearheaded efforts to thin the forest around Cloudcroft.

“This is not just about a tree,” said Rardin. “It’s about the fact that our county has been in a declared state of emergency for quite some time now because of severe drought. Our forest has been overcrowded for too long. We are going to show the world what an acre of forest land should look like.”