

FORESTS: Group sues to stop thinning project near Grand Canyon

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An environmental group filed a lawsuit against the Forest Service yesterday over a proposed forest-thinning project that would include harvesting old-growth trees within northern goshawk habitat on the south rim of the Grand Canyon.

The Center for Biological Diversity's lawsuit accuses Kaibab National Forest officials of violating the forest's management plan by proposing the removal of large trees within an area inhabited by the northern goshawk, a raptor for which the center has unsuccessfully sought Endangered Species Act protection.

Under the proposal, about 700 acres of mature and old-growth ponderosa pines would be harvested.

"The Forest Service simply reinterprets its forest plan in a couple different ways that would allow logging of considerably more larger trees than the scientific basis of the forest plan allows for," the center's Jay Lininger said. The lawsuit was filed in U.S. District Court in Phoenix.

The area encompasses habitat for the largest breeding goshawk population in the lower 48 states, according to the center.

The proposal marks the fifth time the Forest Service has tried to log the area, Lininger added. The group successfully blocked two previous attempts, and in the other two cases, the Forest Service voluntarily withdrew the proposals.

Lininger said the new design for the Jacob-Ryan Vegetative Management Project differs little from previous iterations.

"They didn't modify the timber sale; the only thing they did was modify how they talk about the timber sale," he said. For instance, in the proposal, the Forest Service now acknowledges that it will remove larger and older trees.

Kaibab National Forest officials declined to comment, citing agency policy that bars officials from weighing in on pending lawsuits. But in a January news release announcing its finding that the Jacob-Ryan timber sale would cause "no significant impact," the Forest Service said the project would improve goshawk habitat by creating a more diverse forest structure, with trees of various ages and sizes.

The agency says the project, which would involve prescribed burning and thinning, would also enhance forest health and reduce the risk of super-hot, unnaturally large wildfires, several of which burned through large swaths of Arizona last summer.

"This project is based on the best available science and the forest plan with the goal of restoring a healthy ponderosa pine forest," North Kaibab District Ranger Timothy Short said in the release. "This includes preventing catastrophic wildfires such as the 2006 Warm Fire on this district or those that occurred in eastern Arizona last year."

The project's thinning prescriptions are based on recommendations by leading experts on northern goshawks and their habitat requirements, according to the Forest Service.

"I believe [the chosen alternative] does the best job of implementing Forest Plan direction, improving forest health, and reducing the risk of severe wildfires, while minimizing impacts to soils, wildlife and other resources," Short wrote in the environmental assessment.

And only a small percentage of the forest's old-growth trees will be removed, he added.

"I anticipate that some critics of my decision may mischaracterize this project with claims that it will significantly reduce old growth habitat," Short wrote in the assessment. "Alternative 1 would reduce old growth by up to 105 acres within the 26,916 acre Jacob-Ryan project area. This equates to approximately 0.4 percent change in old growth allocation."

Loggers would cull old-growth trees only where it would be necessary to promote restoration goals, according to the agency.