

## Appeal stops Bonito logging project

By Dianne Stallings

The Center for Biological Diversity won an appeal Thursday challenging an 11,000-acre “Bonito” logging project near Ruidoso.

In an Oct. 19 letter to the Center, Roberta Buskirk, U.S. Forest Service acting deputy regional forester and appeals deciding officer, notified Jay Lininger, an ecologist with the Center, that she had reversed the decision of the forest supervisor.

“My review of your appeal focused on the project documentation and the issues raised in your appeal,” she wrote. After considering those items, she recommended the forest supervisor’s decision be reversed and found that the Environment Assessment and project record did not disclose the effects analysis for proposed activities on soil with moderate and severe erosion hazard, did not analyze old growth at three scales as required by the Forest Plan and did not analyze the canopy cover requirements of the Forest Plan.

She concluded that a new decision covering those items is needed for the Bonito Restoration Project.

The appeal ruling requires the Forest Service to do a new environmental analysis to comply with its own policies protecting wildlife habitat and old growth, Lininger said. The Forest Service approved the logging, although its analysis showed that it would remove more forest canopy than its own rules protecting northern goshawk and Mexican spotted owl allow, he contended. The agency also tried to remove more large trees (greater than 16-inch diameter) than its rules allow in old-growth-deficient forests, Lininger said in a prepared statement on the decision.

“We support active management to restore forests and protect communities,” Lininger said. “But in this case, the Forest Service was going after large trees while thumbing its nose at its own rules. Logging large trees damages wildlife habitat and increases, rather than decreases, fire hazard.”

Bonito is the third major project approved by the Lincoln National Forest since November 2009. The Jim Lewis and South Guadalupe projects combined will thin and burn 55,563 acres to reduce wildfire hazard and restore historic forest conditions.

Of the three projects, only Bonito drew an environmental appeal, he pointed out.

Appeals were filed by the Biodiversity Center and the Wild Earth Guardians after a Finding of No Significant Impact was published by the Lincoln National Forest Supervisor Robert Trujillo as a result of an environmental assessment. Smokey Bear District Ranger Dave Warnack told Lincoln County commissioners at their September meeting. The commission went on record in support of the project. At the time, Warnack said he appreciated the process that allowed input and appeals and requires the Forest Service to examine its conclusions.

Lininger said in the Forest Service’s other projects, the agency, “safely reduced hazardous fuels while protecting large trees and canopy for wildlife. This time around, foresters bowed to radical anti-environmental politicians by targeting large trees.”

U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, a Republican who represents the 2nd Congressional District of New Mexico, complained

that litigation and endangered species have prevented logging in the Lincoln National Forest, and he introduced legislation, House Resolution 1202. Lininger said the effect would be to suspend all environmental laws for logging on all national forest land, but Pearce has said the bill will restart jobs in the timber industry by providing protection for the Mexican spotted owl in sanctuaries.

Lininger insisted that litigation is rare on the Lincoln, and the Forest Service has treated hazardous fuels on nearly 40 percent, 421,000 acres, of the 1.1 million-acre national forest in the past 10 years. Lininger cited an April 24 interview in The Alamogordo News with George Ellinger, owner of Ellinger Logging in Alamogordo, who was quoted as saying, "There's a misconception that there's no logging going on. Pearce came down and did a big talk with everybody, but he's not talking to anybody who knows anything."

In his July approval of the Bonito Forest Restoration project, Lincoln National Forest Supervisor Robert Trujillo said the thinning would protect and enhance the watershed, recreation and forest health resources, and decrease the potential for high intensity wildfires. He also said the project would improve wildlife habitat and provide employment to the region through fuel wood and timber harvests.