

## Groups call for reduced Black Hills logging

[Marc Heller](#), E&E News reporter

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A timber harvest at Black Hills National Forest. Black Hills National Forest/Flickr

Conservation groups called on the Forest Service to sharply reduce logging in the Black Hills National Forest, after the agency stuck by higher timber targets at the close of the Trump administration.

The decision by the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain regional office appeared to contradict the Black Hills forest supervisor's recommendation to scale back harvests, and the move caught the attention of the Center for Biological Diversity and the Oglala Sioux Tribe, which led a letter to acting Regional Forester Tammy Angel on Feb. 16.

"We request a meeting with you as soon as possible to discuss this critical problem, and to learn how the Forest Service intends to bring logging levels on the Forest into compliance with law and sound management policies," the groups wrote, citing the regional forester's decision to set an annual target of 18.1 million cubic feet of timber as sustainable — nearly triple the forest supervisor's recommendation of about 6.2 million cubic feet, made last September.

"This level is plainly not sustainable long-term and ignores nearly a decade of the agency's own data," the groups said in their [letter](#).

The Forest Service didn't immediately respond to a request for comment today, but the agency has been grappling with how best to manage logging in the Black Hills, which cover 1.2 million acres in South Dakota and Wyoming. In a draft technical report last year, the service's Rocky Mountain Research Station said the forest could no longer sustain current harvest levels due to beetle infestations, disease, wildfire and historic logging ([Greenwire](#), May 11, 2020).

The report said maintaining current timber harvests represents the "worst and most extreme possible future for forests of the Black Hills."

In response to that research and earlier agency findings, the Black Hills forest supervisor in September recommended to the Black Hills National Forest Advisory Board that the agency adopt the lower sustainability target — a recommendation the agency so far hasn't adopted.

Collaboration with industry and local groups continues, the Forest Service said on the Black Hills National Forest website.

"The Black Hills National Forest is committed to the continued success of our timber industry partners," the agency said, adding that the Forest Service will use data collected over the past few years to adjust harvest levels. "Collaboration with partners, stakeholders and local government officials will continue to ensure an economically viable, sustainable program is developed for future generations."

On the other side of the issue are timber industry groups in the region, as well as Sens. John Thune (R-S.D.) and John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), who have urged the Forest Service in writing not to reduce the targets. Doing so, they said, would run counter to the agency's overall goal of boosting timber production on lands it manages — although that goal may not be as robust in the Biden administration as it was under President Trump.

Among other assertions, timber groups say the Forest Service researchers may have overstated the ongoing threat of pine beetles. The last infestation ended in 2016, the federal government has said.

Ponderosa pine is the predominant species in the forest, which is also the site of the Forest Service's first federal timber sale in 1899.

In their letter, the conservation groups asked Angel to immediately reduce the timber sales volume for the Black Hills and to revise the forest plan, a longer-term planning document that governs land use. The forest plan was last revised in 1997, they said.

Failing to reduce the targets would violate a legal requirement that timber harvests on federal land occur in a sustainable matter, they said.

"A continuation of non-sustainable logging will result in a crash of the local timber industry and permanent loss of jobs. This will have long-term consequences not only for local communities; it will also irreparably harm this Forest's unique flora and fauna," they said.

Email: [mheller@eenews.net](mailto:mheller@eenews.net)

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