

Groups urge USDA to review Trump-era energy, timber projects

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Environmental groups are asking top officials at the Department of Agriculture to review several timber harvesting and other resource development projects in national forests, contending that they conflict with the new administration's priorities.

Thirty-nine groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club, said projects recently approved or on the verge of approval should be put on hold and subjected to a high-level review at USDA headquarters.

In a [letter](#) to acting Secretary of Agriculture Kevin Shea yesterday, the groups identified projects such as the Pacific Connector gas pipeline, which runs through three national forests in Oregon and requires the clearcutting of a 30-mile-long, 90-foot-wide right of way through imperiled species habitat.

That project could be approved at any time, the groups said. Other projects include the Black Ram Project in the Kootenai National Forest in Montana, including commercial logging and thinning to reduce wildfire risk. That project involves about 2,000 acres of clearcuts and 4,000 acres of commercial logging and could be approved within days, the groups said.

"We seek such an elevation because of the potential for Forest Service officials at the ranger district, forest, and regional forester levels to finalize decisions based in part on the prior administration's emphasis on increased timber harvest and unrestrained fossil fuel development, on circumventing National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) public involvement opportunities, and attempts to undermine protection of inventoried roadless areas (IRAs)," the groups said.

They added, "All of these prior administration efforts are at odds with the new administration's agenda, including the goal of conserving 30 percent of United States lands and waters by 2030."

The organizations asked USDA to immediately begin a 60-day review period by either the secretary or the undersecretary for natural resources and environment, neither of which position has been filled. Tom Vilsack could be confirmed as Agriculture secretary as soon as next week, after a Tuesday hearing in the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee.

An elevated review would mirror similar action recently at the Interior Department.

The Forest Service's Black Ram Project in Montana, for instance, is nearing final approval. On Wednesday, the agency responded in writing to objections from the Center for Biological Diversity and others, a signal that the proposals continues to move forward.

Among other complaints, objectors warned that the project would disrupt denning habitat for grizzly bears and that officials didn't adequately consider impacts to climate change from removing trees. The Forest Service said its environmental analysis addressed bear habitat and included a carbon cycle analysis, and that the project area affects a tiny percentage of the forest's carbon stocks.

The groups also urged the Forest Service to reconsider its approval of the Mountain Valley pipeline and Equitrans Expansion Project in the Jefferson National Forest in Virginia, on which the Trump administration issued a [record of decision](#) Jan. 11.

In that case, the groups said, permits granted under the Clean Water Act are already being reopened, and the project in total should be reviewed again, as well. The project also has political implications, including support from the incoming Democratic chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Joe Manchin of West Virginia ([E&E Daily](#), Jan. 18).

But the 300-mile Mountain Valley project is entangled in legal and bureaucratic delays, as well, including at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. The developer, EQM Midstream Partners LP, recently told regulators it intends to go through an "individual permit" process for more than 400 water crossings, and opponents are challenging several agencies' approvals ([Energywire](#), Jan. 26).

Among other groups joining the letter were the Southern Environmental Law Center, the Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, the Western Environmental Law Center and Wild Heritage.