



## Appeal delays Fort Valley Road fire reduction project

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06/18/1999

Sun Staff Reporters

A 1,700-acre forest thinning project off North Fort Valley Road aimed at reducing fire danger in the Flagstaff region won't be starting next week as planned.

Seven conservation groups have filed an 11th-hour appeal that will postpone the project up to six weeks and possibly halt it altogether.

The logging project, which is also aimed at restoring the forest to a more open pattern with larger trees, is the first in an ambitious 10-year plan that will encompass 100,000 acres of the Coconino National Forest and other lands near Flagstaff.

But the appeal by Forest Guardians and six other groups charges the U.S Forest Service with conducting an inadequate environmental review for a project that will do little to reduce the fire risk while destroying wildlife habitat, water quality, and recreational opportunities.

"It's time for Flagstaff residents to wake up to the deception that is being played out on the forests around them," said John Talberth, Forest Guardians executive director, in a statement released yesterday.

But John Gerritsma, the liaison between the Forest Service and the Grand Canyon Forests Partnership, criticized the last-minute appeal. He said the groups should have taken part in the process rather than trying to create a logjam at this late date.

The project was to have begun next week. Today is the last day to file an appeal on the project.

"This is a typical tactic from the Forest Guardians," Gerritsma said. "What they will do is go through a laundry list of things. It's their typical tactic to try to trip up somewhere on some kind of process deal that they can use to stop the project. I guess what they're saying is that the restoration of forest health and the reduction of catastrophic fire danger is not important."

The appeal asks that the Fort Valley Restoration project be withdrawn and that planning for the project be suspended until a comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement be completed.

An Environmental Assessment has been completed, but the appeal criticizes the Forest Service's decision to do an EA on each phase of the project, rather than a more comprehensive EIS for the entire proposal.

The 1,700 acres in question are about seven miles northwest of Flagstaff just east of the Snowbowl Road.

The appeal, which claims that Forest Guardians and other appellants did take part in the process during the scoping period and the 30-day comment period on the draft environmental assessment, raises several issues regarding the project. They include claims that the Forest Service failed to address the cumulative effects of the project; failed to protect sensitive wildlife species such as the northern goshawk and the Mexican spotted owl; failed to analyze the adverse economic effects of the project; and failed to use experts who are qualified to address effects of the logging on old growth forests.

Other groups that filed the appeal were the Flagstaff Activist Network, Forest Conservation Council, John Muir Project, the Lands Council, the Native Forest Council, and the National Forest Protection Alliance.

The Fort Valley logging project is the first phase of a 100,000-acre project that will see the thinning of trees, road construction, road upgrades, prescribed burning and other treatments. About 250 acres have already been treated in the proposed 10-year project, with the 1,700 acres in Fort Valley the next step.

The project has been embraced by the Grand Canyon Forests Partnership, a coalition of 18 organizations that include the Rural Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, the Grand Canyon Trust, the Flagstaff Chamber of Commerce, Smurfitt-Stone Container (formerly Stone Forest Industries), Northern Arizona University, the Flagstaff Fire Department and Coconino County.

The coalition was formed to protect the city from wildfire hazard and to "promote ecological values of the forest surrounding Flagstaff to implement a restoration-oriented approach to forestry," said Brett KenCairn, the director of the Forests Partnership who is employed by the Grand Canyon Trust.

Gerritsma also disagreed with the appeal's statement that experts had not been contacted and that wildlife was not considered in creating the project.

"In general, the wildlife impacts have all been analyzed," he said. "We have gone through consultations with the Fish and Wildlife Service. They signed off after we made changes to protect the spotted owl. We talked to Game and Fish. There's been a lot of involvement there."

Gerritsma also said the Partnership has worked with groups that are not members of the Partnership, such as the Southwest Forest Alliance, Sierra Club and Southwest Center for Biological Diversity.

Kieran Suckling, Southwest Center for Biological Diversity's executive director and a frequent opponent of the Forest Service, agreed with the need to thin around Flagstaff.

"We do agree that there are too many trees in many places," he said, adding that fire danger is only one part of the concern. "We've always discussed that problem in terms of tree competition for water, for sunlight, for nutrient content."

The appeal also cited Forest Service researcher Jack Cohen as saying that "wildland fuel reduction for reducing home losses may be inefficient and ineffective."

It says Cohen argues that managing the immediate vicinity of structures and using fireproof building materials is a far more effective strategy than thinning distant forest and other vegetation.

Gerritsma disagreed.

"Cohen said people should be responsible for their own private land and that the Forest Service should not protect people from wildfire. That basically we clear fuel from 150 feet around our homes," he said. "That says that people don't care for the forest outside their back yards. It's impractical. Very people would believe that. That's delusional to think that you can't protect the forest by doing thinning. That's crazy."

KenCairn said that the appeal is not about the merits of the Fort Valley project but about the groups' desire for absolutely no cutting on any forest.

"The very sad and disturbing thing about the zero cut philosophy is the lack of understanding of forest management and what it really costs to implement restoration," said KenCairn. "They would argue that timber sales don't make any money so why should we do them. The only major difference between this project and the types of forest restoration they have agreed should occur on public lands is that they would have the taxpayer cover the entire cost."

The appeal states that the economic analysis fails to assign any economic value to existing uses of the area and fails to consider the externalized economic costs of logging.

KenCairn, however, said that banning the sales of forest products generated by restoration activities would increase the cost of restoration activities by \$70 million to \$140 million over the next 10 to 15 years.

"Not only have the Forest Guardians never demonstrated any interest or commitment to assist this community in securing such funding from public sources, there is very little chance that public funding of this magnitude would be forthcoming from Congress or any other source," KenCairn said.

He also criticized the appeal's claim that the Fort Valley project did not get enough input from the community at large.

"The argument that we have not included outside experts reveals their lack of awareness of the project," KenCairn said. "We invited the environmental community to bring their own scientists to meet with our scientist. Based on those comments, we made constructive adjustments to the project."

He said that the Sierra Club, Southwest Center for Biological Diversity and Southwest Forest Alliance met with the group of scientists.

"The thing that was striking about that meeting was a very strong concurrence of opinion amongst the scientists present," he said.

He said that while the different groups made compromises such as limiting the trees cut to those that are 16 inches in diameter or smaller, everyone agreed that action must be taken for the health of the forest.

"We are losing our old growth (trees) every day out there because of the population of small trees. We agree with Forest Guardians that old growth is the single most important ecological feature of our landscape. Their way is so leave things alone. But the research is very clear: No action is leading to increasing mortality in old growth that's left," he said. "In some ways no action is the most radical management and the most dangerous choice being proposed."