



Appeals pit environmentalists against each other

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All it takes is a 33-cent stamp.

Filing an appeal to stop a forest thinning project isn't difficult, but the results can be far-reaching.

The recent appeal granted by the Southwest regional forester of the U.S. Forest Service in the name of several environmental groups last month put a stop to the Fort Valley Project.

The first stage of the forest thinning and restoration project would have cut 1,700 acres flanking the San Francisco Peaks to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires around Flagstaff and to improve forest health. The overall project looks to thin, with varying treatments, 100,000 acres of fire-prone forest around Flagstaff during the next 10 years.

The disagreement regarding the project is typical of a growing debate among environmental groups, the logging industry and the U.S. Forest Service about what's best for the forest.

Interestingly, much of the argument comes between the different environmental groups.

Some groups are dead set against logging any trees. Others want nothing cut that is larger than 16 inches in diameter (at breast height). And more moderate environmentalists feel that taking a different amount and sizes of trees from different areas is what's needed for a healthy forest.

"Everybody agrees that fire suppression was a bad idea and that the forest needs to be thinned," said Sharon Galbreath, of the Sierra Club's Grand Canyon chapter. "Where there is disagreement is to what density the forest gets thinned. There's widespread support in the environmental community for thinning a fairly large amount of small-diameter trees. We've opposed the prescription that's being done with the Forest Partnership. It removes 95 percent of the trees."

Actually, on the Forest Partnership's project there are several different prescriptions for the different experimental plots. Some call for up to 90 percent of the trees being cut. Others call for no cutting at all.

The first analysis done for the project was of 10,000 acres. Of those, less than half were slated for any type of treatment, according to Brett KenCairn, executive director for the Grand Canyon Forests Partnership, which has led the forest restoration project. About 2,500 acres were slated for more intense restoration treatment that KenCairn said was agreed upon by a group of scientists.

KenCairn said that while the groups that appealed to stop the Fort Valley Project want to save the forest and particularly old-growth trees (about 150 years old and older), little or no action won't do that.

"Those groups that say no action is the best alternative aren't taking responsibility...for the fact that old-growth trees are the very values that will be imperiled if we are not able to do restoration out there," KenCairn said.

BURN, DON'T LOG

However, John Talberth, of National Forest Protection Alliance and formerly with Forest Guardians, said the Forest Service and those who back the Fort Valley Project aren't relying on strong research.

"The assumption out there is that we need to get the smaller timber out," said Talberth, who is based in Santa Fe, N.M.

"But none of the Forest Service literature or studies of these logging projects shows that logging actually accomplishes these goals or shows that conditions are not natural if you look at a broad enough area."

He said the Forest Service is still trying to push logging and doesn't acknowledge that the true solution to a too-dense forest is prescribed burns.

"We don't buy that, nor does the research show that," he said, adding that some studies show that dense clusters of trees always have been part of the natural forest.

"They haven't really done their homework," he said.

In the appeal granted in August, the environmental groups cited a study that says the important work in getting back to a healthy forest with lower fire danger is by private landowners taking care of their land. The Forest Service, Talberth said, won't be lowering fire danger if it logs trees "miles from people's homes,"

He suggested that the Forest Service focus its energy and money on doing prescribed burns and helping those private landowners, rather than supporting the commercial timber industry.

MIXED APPROACH NEEDED

KenCairn, of the Forest Partnership, disagreed, pointing out that the restoration project is not only cutting down trees, but also includes prescribed burns, roadwork and habitat attention.

KenCairn added that a successful appeal such as the one granted last month that postponed the Fort Valley Project for four months hurt the already sensitive process of environmentalists working with loggers.

"It's damaged our credibility in asserting to the industry that they should retool when groups continue to thwart any effort to even, at a very small scale, try to develop and demonstrate what responsible restoration would be," he said.

KenCairn added that as the appeals hold up what he says is essential thinning of the woods, they also affect the people who are willing to do the work.

"They took a risk and spent money preparing themselves to make that transition, only to find us again delayed. This will go forward, but how long can they wait?" he asked. "We need to take action because of the years of neglect, and that's very expensive. For us to accomplish the scale of restoration necessary, not just for human lives and property but for imperiled species and very precious wildlife habitat, we have to act on a scale that that's going to cost a lot of money."

KenCairn added: "We desperately need those people like Wes Perkins and Allen Ribelin who spend their days out doing the very hard work of forest restoration (see related article). The undiscussed element is that our highly skilled forest work force is one of the most precious and dwindling resources that we have. They are precious from the standpoint of protecting our valuable forest."

INFRASTRUCTURE LACKING

Jim Golden, Coconino National Forest Supervisor, agreed.

"It's very obvious and painfully obvious that we no longer have the infrastructure to help us carry out restoration work in the forest -- not only loggers but timber processors," he said. "It's the market, basically. We have to have someplace to take the trees."

Golden said there's money to be made by people who can come up with a way to process the small trees. But because of the successful appeals, that's not as appealing as some might think.

"It certainly increased the risk," he said. "Nobody can eliminate the risk, because forest management is a hot political issue. But on the other hand, there is an economic niche here that is void right now and that eventually somebody will fill."

Golden said this reality means a serious balancing act between forest health and economics -- and not just in Flagstaff.

"The question the nation as a whole has to answer is: How can we reduce the risk for those folks and still put our forest on a scientific management basis? We don't want to have a number of mills in there and all of a sudden have pressure of producing logs instead of managing the forest appropriately, which is sort of the history of logging," he said.

"It's disappointing to have these delays...because of how long some of these folks who depend on the forest projects and Forest Service businesses can hold one waiting as we build a new public agreement on forestry," KenCairn added.

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