

Appeal denied

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Fort Valley, the controversial on-again, off-again forest thinning and restoration project to reduce wildfire danger on more than 9,000 acres north of Flagstaff, is back on again.

For the moment, anyway.

Regional Forester Eleanor Towns Thursday denied an appeal filed by 10 local and out-of-state environmental groups who said the project was too extreme and was not sensitive to wildlife concerns.

Some of the appellants said the next stop could be a courthouse, which might stop the project again.

The Fort Valley Ecosystem Restoration Project calls for thinning 4,500 acres of some 9,100 acres of private and government land. Roads will be closed, meadows restored and prescribed burns will remove decades of accumulated debris on 7,000 acres in Fort Valley under the plan.

"It's not unexpected that the regional forester has affirmed our decision. We are looking forward to finally getting this project underway because we believe it's real important to the community as well as to the forest itself," said Jim Golden, supervisor of the Coconino National Forest.

For the past two years, opponents such as the Flagstaff Activist Network, Forest Guardians of Santa Fe, N.M., and the Forest Conservation Council have cited the project's impact on wildlife, forest health and recreational resources in an effort to stall the project.

"We think on balance it's going to do more harm than good and there are other alternatives out there for reducing fire risk that don't involve basically dismantling the forests around Flagstaff," said John Talberth of Forest Conservation Council, "We are going to be looking over the decision and making a decision whether or not to litigate on this next week."

The other groups have also not decided whether they will file a legal challenge. Opponents have 15 days to decide before the Forest Service awards its first bid on the timber that will be removed from Fort Valley.

We expect there could be further litigation, but we feel we're well-prepared for that at this point," said Golden.

Fort Valley is considered a model for restoration across the West by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and U.S. Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., and is being touted in some forestry circles as the "Flagstaff Plan."

The potential for the various forest thinning treatments proposed for Fort Valley being adopted across the nation concerned the Southwest Forest Alliance, Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club.

In their appeal, the groups said Fort Valley "sets precedent across millions of acres" and a comprehensive environmental impact statement for the project needs to be prepared before it is launched.

But Towns agreed with Coconino National Forest officials that the only national precedent set by the Flagstaff Plan is its focus on collaboration between community groups, local officials and conservation groups.

Brian Nowicki of Southwest Forest Alliance called Towns' response troubling. "We gave them a whole book on how it does set precedents for future projects and they discounted it. This is a significant federal action and other places across the West will be looking at it," he said.

Nowicki also noted that Towns ignored many points showing deficiencies in the Fort Valley plan that could have been easily corrected to satisfy the Southwest Forest Alliance's concerns.

"Obviously, we're a little bit disappointed, by not necessarily the decision, but the failure to even address a lot of the questions and the points we raised in the appeal. The decision doesn't even mention a lot of the points, and when it does, it leaves out the evidence that we said about it. So it really looks like it's based on politics and that they had to fill up so many pages to give us the decision," he said.

Environmentalists said the Forest Service violated the National Environmental Policy Act by not conducting an environmental study before moving ahead. Specifically, the groups said a study is required because it is highly debatable and "controversial" that the thinning at Fort Valley will accomplish its major goal of reducing wildfire threats.

But the Forest Service said many studies show that when the thinning is done in combination with prescribed burns removing accumulated forest fuels, the risk of catastrophic wildfire is reduced. Towns agreed that the Forest Service had done a thorough search of available scientific literature on the impact of thinning on reducing fire danger and did not need to go further.

In its appeal, the Forest Conservation Council raised alarms about the various thinning prescriptions being used at Fort Valley, especially the "pre-settlement" model pioneered by the Ecological Restoration Institute at Northern Arizona University.

While some prescriptions remove only small percentages of small trees less than 16 inches in diameter on various parcels in Fort Valley, the pre-settlement model calls for the removal of up to 80 percent of small trees on lots, leaving a "plantation" appearance, say opponents.

"In general we feel that the prescriptions being used are inconsistent with maintenance of the forest as a forest ecosystem. There are a number of species -- goshawk, flammulated owls, Abert squirrels and Mexican spotted owls -- that depend on a certain kind of forest structure and this pre-settlement model that seeks to convert the forest from what it is now to what they believe are pre-settlement conditions is inconsistent with the survivability of these species. So that is a major concern," Talberth said.

Forest Guardians said the project will cause a decline of forest species, including the northern Goshawk, pygmy nuthatch and hairy woodpecker and thinning will violate the National Forest Management Act.

The Forest Service responded that the bird species are declining because of a lack of large, old growth trees in Fort Valley and that thinning small-diameter trees is not an issue. By thinning and protecting what old growth is left in Fort Valley, the project will eventually "provide good habitat" for these species, the Forest Service said.

Thinning and meadow restoration will cause Abert squirrel populations to decline, but enough will remain in northern goshawk foraging areas. Forest treatments will also result in increased populations of the goshawks' prey species such as cottontail rabbits, robins, gold-mantled ground squirrels and chipmunks, said the Forest Service.

The Fort Valley project involves the Forest Service, the Grand Canyon Forests Partnership and the Ecological Restoration Institute.

The project will be implemented in two phases. The first one involves 1,700 acres of thinning, divided into blocks using various thinning prescriptions. Once it is completed, Partnership, Forest Service specialists and interested parties will evaluate the results. The second phase will implement any changes required on an additional 2,800 acres of thinning, followed by the use of prescribed fire on up to 7,000 acres in the Fort Valley area. Eventually, the Partnership hopes to restore 180,000 acres of forests in and around the San Francisco Peaks.

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