



Judge in Oregon orders harder look at forestry project

The Associated Press By The Associated Press

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GRANTS PASS, Ore. -- A federal judge ruled Monday that federal forest managers have to take a harder look at the environmental harm that could be caused by a new forestry project planned in northern spotted owl habitat as a way to break a logjam over timber harvests in the Northwest.

U.S. District Judge Ann Aiken ruled in Eugene that the environmental analysis the U.S. Bureau of Land Management did on the White Castle timber sale outside Roseburg was inadequate. Aiken ordered a more stringent environmental impact statement.

She found BLM didn't consider how logging mature forest would harm the spotted owl, a threatened species, and the agency should have considered more than one alternative for analysis.

Specifically, BLM should have looked at logging in a younger forest as well as the mature forest where the project was sited.

"The project may be relatively small in size but it will adversely affect the northern spotted owl," Aiken wrote. "Moreover, it represents a pilot test with effects that are likely to be highly controversial, highly uncertain, and influential on future project planning."

The timber sale was part of a series of pilot projects ordered by the Obama administration to demonstrate so-called "ecological restoration" forestry as a way to increase timber harvests on federal lands in the Northwest while making forests more healthy and creating better habitat for fish and wildlife.

The approach is based in principles developed by forestry professors Norm Johnson of Oregon State University and Jerry Franklin of University of Washington, two authors of the Northwest Forest Plan, a 1994 court-ordered blueprint for protecting the spotted owl, salmon and a host of other species dependent on old growth forests.

The plan also cut timber harvest by 90 percent, sending many rural timber towns into an economic tailspin.

The BLM and U.S. Forest Service are in the process of overhauling the Northwest Forest Plan.

In 2010, Ken Salazar, then secretary of Interior, came to Roseburg to learn about ecological restoration forestry, and ordered BLM to do a series of pilot projects based on Franklin and Johnson's ideas.

Steve Pedery, conservation director of Oregon Wild, one of the conservation groups that brought the lawsuit, said the ruling threw into doubt the ability of BLM to use ecological restoration forestry to expand timber harvests into old growth forests in the Northwest, because there is still a lot of scientific uncertainty.

BLM spokeswoman Jody Weil said the agency was reviewing the ruling and had no immediate comment.

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