

BREAKING Crazy Mountains turbulence: Management sparks spirits, feuds

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TOPICAL

Environmental groups challenge Bridger Mountains logging project

BRETT FRENCH french@billingsgazette.com Jun 5, 2019

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A logging project proposed in the Bridger Mountains has been challenged in a lawsuit brought by the Alliance for the Wild Rockies and the Native Ecosystems Council.

BRETT FRENCH, Billings Gazette

Two environmental groups filed suit in a Missoula federal court on Monday challenging a proposed logging project in the Bridger Mountains next to two popular winter recreation areas.

The Alliance for the Wild Rockies and Native Ecosystems Council claim the Forest Service failed to analyze the significance of woodlands next to lands that could qualify for wilderness designation in a bill currently before Congress.

“The Bridger Roadless area would be designated as Wilderness under the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (NREPA),” said Mike Garrity, executive director of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, in an email. “NREPA recognizes the Bridger Mountains as an important wildlife corridor and this project calls for 2,296 acres of commercial logging including 667 acres of clearcutting, 87 acres of ‘group selection’ and 1,542 acres of intermediate logging.”

Going back

The North Bridgers project was proposed in 2017 to log areas north of Bridger Bowl Ski Area and next to the Crosscut Mountain Sports Center's Nordic skiing facilities as well as along the road to Ross Pass. Work is also proposed at the northern end of the Bangtail Mountains, which contains a popular mountain biking route known as Bangtail Divide Trail.

Farther north, work is proposed around Battle Ridge Campground and near Fairy Lake. All told, the Forest Service is proposing to log 2,300 acres spread across 10,000 acres of forest land. Work was scheduled to last about five years.

The agency approved the project last year to lessen the chance of forest disease and insect infestation, to remove Douglas fir and other conifers, along with some broadcast burning, to improve forest health and promote aspen regeneration.

Some of the aspen treatment work began last fall near Fairy Lake, according to Colleen Lewellen, Bozeman District ranger. This summer the district was planning to start putting together a commercial contract by marking trees and advertising the sale so that work could begin in the fall.

Forest act

The North Bridgers project was one of several identified by the Forest Service under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act to speed up logging to address disease, insect and wildland fire threats.

Following the 2014 bill's passage, former Forest Service Chief Thomas Tidwell designated 4.95 million acres as threatened landscapes in Montana at the request of Gov. Steve Bullock.

"This timber sale is part of the Forest Service's plan to log almost 5 million acres in Montana with no environmental analysis," Garrity said. "However, since the Forest Service didn't analyze the cumulative impacts when they designated 5 million acres for fast-track logging up front, at a minimum, the Forest Service needs to do it for each project when they propose it. And they didn't do that."

Another project, on the west side of the Crazy Mountains, that was developed by the Custer Gallatin National Forest under the same act survived a court challenge by the two environmental groups last year.

Collaborate

To help design the North Bridgers project and build consensus, the Forest Service held meetings with community members and offered field trips to the sites. Members of a subcommittee of the Custer Gallatin Working Group were generally supportive of the agency's initial proposals.

"We feel really good about the project," Lewellen said, in that it was developed through collaboration with partners and will address disease and insect threats to the area.

“I feel like at the end of the day we came up with a good project,” he added.

But the environmental groups claim in their lawsuit that “The Forest Service predetermined the Project would be categorically excluded prior to determining whether the Project’s impacts were insignificant.”

Roadless

What’s more, the Forest Service failed to disclose the number of acres within the Bridger Inventoried Roadless Area and failed to disclose the number of un-inventoried roadless acres adjacent to the Bridger IRA, Garrity said.

“The Forest Service is required to analyze the un-inventoried roadless areas adjacent to the Bridger IRA in the context of their potential for Wilderness designation in order to determine significance,” Garrity said. “But the agency failed to do so here. Because we believe it would significantly affect the Wilderness potential of the area we’re challenging the project.”

Sara Jane Johnson, a former Gallatin National Forest wildlife biologist, said in an email that the project also threatens wildlife and public land hunting in the area.

“95% of forest species in the area would be hurt by bulldozing 9.5 miles of new road to log nearly 2,300 acres of elk hiding cover in the Bridger Mountains,” she said. “Elk will be driven out of public lands onto private lands, resulting in fewer elk hunting opportunities for hunters, game damage to private lands, and impacting the ability of Montana’s wildlife managers to meet their elk population objectives. Furthermore, concentration of elk on private lands could also result in the transmission of brucellosis to cattle, which may well destroy the ranchers’ livelihood.”

The lawsuit seeks a halt to the project with the matter remanded to the Forest Service for further work until it can demonstrate to the court that it has “adequately complied with the law.” It also seeks to set aside the project decision memorandum and categorical exclusion and to award the plaintiffs their costs, expenses, expert witness fees, and reasonable attorney fees.

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IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF MONTANA
MISSOULA, MONTANA

ALLIANCE FOR THE WILD ROCKIES AND NATIVE HOVINGTOWN COUNCIL Plaintiffs,	vs. LEONIE MARTIN, Regional Forester of Region One of the U.S. Forest Service, UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE, as agents of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Defendants.
	CV: COMPLAINT FOR INJUNCTIVE AND DECLARATORY RELIEF



North Bridgers complaint
Brett French Jun 3, 2019

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