



Upper Bitter Creek Project decision reversed on appeal

By Matthew van Buren

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The U.S. Forest Service has reversed a decision to allow a project in the Questa Ranger District to go forward after appellants raised various concerns and described it as a “logging project disguised as restoration.”

The Upper Bitter Creek Project, proposed for implementation in a 5,229-acre area about 15 miles north of Questa, called for forest thinning in order to address the “declining availability of personal use wood products,” declining forest health and quality of wildlife habitat, and potential threats to watershed health.

Questa District Ranger Jerome Mastel signed a decision notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) June 28 that would have allowed the project to be implemented.

However, several groups, including Taos nonprofit Amigos Bravos, appealed the decision. In a letter to the Forest Service, Amigos Bravos raised concerns about sediment from roads associated with the project affecting water quality in the Bitter Creek, already listed by the New Mexico Environment Department as impaired for sediment.

“We are extremely concerned about the 11.6 miles of new roads that are proposed in this project to facilitate the thinning/logging of 2,542 acres of spruce-fir forest in the Upper Bitter Creek Watershed,” the letter states. “We believe that these proposed roads could cause or contribute to additional water quality degradation.”

In his reversal of the decision, district ranger and appeal reviewing officer Dennis Aldridge concluded that the decision “is not consistent with policy, direction and supporting evidence” for several reasons, including:

- * The Upper Bitter Creek (Environmental Assessment) and project record fail to demonstrate how the project complied with the Carson Forest Plan requirements for old growth analysis.
- * The Upper Bitter Creek EA and project record fail to demonstrate how the project complied with the Carson Forest Plan requirements for road density within (several management areas).
- * The Upper Bitter Creek EA and project record fail to demonstrate how the project complied with Carson Forest Plan requirements for snags within spruce-fir forest.

Amigos Bravos projects director Rachel Conn said the nonprofit is “extremely pleased” the project won’t be going forward.

“We thought that the project, if implemented, would violate the Clean Water Act and New Mexico’s water quality standards,” she said.

Conn said she is not sure whether to expect the project to be reworked and resubmitted, but she said the project would have the potential to affect water quality even if the road openings and construction associated with the original plan were removed.

“We would still have concerns, even then,” she said. “We were very concerned about this project.”

Bryan Bird, program director with Wild Earth Guardians, which also appealed the project decision, said the Upper Bitter Creek Project was “ill advised” at best and, “frankly, illogical at the worst.” He said the project wouldn’t have any ecological benefits his organization could identify, and that such thinning projects should focus first on protecting lives and property instead of being located far from homes and other structures. “It just made no sense,” he said.

Forestry Program Manager Timothy Fruits, with Carson National Forest, said the plan will be reworked and resubmitted. He said the appeal points are considered “relatively minor changes” that will require some rewording; he said old growth and roads will also be dealt with on a larger scale.

“It will go forward,” he said. “Things like this happen ... This helps us address things that we missed.”

Fruits said a group will be meeting in early November to discuss the best way to address the appeal points; he said he anticipates another decision being issued by early 2013 so work can begin next summer.

“We’re hoping for a pretty quick turnaround,” he said.