

Forest Service, conservation groups reach agreement on management of the Sierras

Feather Publishing

11/3/2014

The U.S. Forest Service and environmental plaintiffs signed a settlement agreement Oct. 9 ending a decade-long legal battle over the 2004 Sierra Nevada Framework Forest Plan Amendment, which affects management of the Sierra Nevada national forests in California.

A coalition of conservation organizations led by Sierra Forest Legacy and including the Center for Biological Diversity, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club and The Wilderness Society filed suit in early 2005 claiming that the 2004 framework plan failed to adequately protect old-growth forests and associated wildlife species and was not consistent with national environmental laws.

They were represented by legal teams from Earthjustice and the Sierra Club.

A consideration in settlement discussions was the Forest Service's current effort to revise the forest plans in the Sierra Nevada under the 2012 Planning Rule. All parties say they are interested in moving forward with plan revision collaboratively, and have agreed upon some of the topics that will be considered in the current revision process.

The parties hope that updating these forest plans will provide an opportunity to reassess understandings of environmental conditions and take into account new science. They believe the conservation strategies included in this settlement agreement will be a useful tool in this process.

In mid-2013, after years of court hearings, appeals and the development of a voluminous court record, the Forest Service and the environmental groups began productive discussions on several key issues, including conservation of at-risk species, the need for increased fire use as a part of forest management, and conservation of post-fire forest conditions.

The settlement agreement documents include creation and analysis of conservation strategies for the Pacific fisher and the California spotted owl, a memorandum of understanding for the increased use of managed fire for ecological benefit, and analysis of forest plan components for post-fire, complex early-seral habitat.

“Over the years we have found that Forest Service scientists, Forest Service leadership and conservation groups, while not in perfect agreement, are beginning to share many of the same concerns over conservation of at-risk species, the positive role of fire as an ecological disturbance process in forest environments, and the need to improve management of post-fire habitats,” said Susan Britting, executive director of Sierra Forest Legacy.

“This settlement agreement allows us to promote an ‘all-lands’ approach by using the best available science to improve forest resilience while protecting at-risk species.”

“We’re encouraged to see collective movement towards conservation of the ecologically important wildlife habitat created by fire,” said Justin Augustine, with the Center for Biological Diversity. “We look forward to working to make that happen so that at-risk species will be able to thrive on our public lands.”

“The parties decided it was a better use of time and resources to sit down, roll up our sleeves and work on an agreement on these issues that were of concern to all of us,” said Bernie Gyant, deputy regional forester for natural resources for the Pacific Southwest Region of the U.S. Forest Service.

“Collaboration is a hallmark of this region. We’re excited about this agreement and what this means for all of us moving forward.”

For more information on at-risk species, fire and early seral forests go to sierraforestlegacy.org and <http://bit.ly/1uRsNDb>.