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Conservation Groups Ask US Forest Service to Stop Playing Politics with Americans' Lives

Coalition Asks Court to Clarify Ruling on Forest Service Maintenance Projects

(Fresno, CA) – Leading conservation groups today urged the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to stop playing political games with citizens' uses of their national forests. The groups filed a response in court over a USFS effort to ignore citizen concerns about damaging timber sales. At issue is a court ruling that ordered the USFS to solicit public input on commercial timber sales and other controversial and environmentally damaging projects. Instead of complying, the USFS has targeted common and non-controversial practices that Americans enjoy on their National Forests such as issuing permits for mushroom hunters, outfitters and other small business enterprises – even going so far as to threaten the harvesting of the national Christmas Tree in New Mexico.

While the order states that the Forest Service must reinstate public comment and appeal on proposals such as timber sales and oil and gas exploration, the USFS appears to be playing politics by applying the order to activities that conservationists have never opposed.

“This is a blatant disregard for the livelihoods of outfitters, mushroom gatherers and average citizens who have the right to responsible uses of their public forests,” said Jim Bensman, of the conservation group Heartwood, a plaintiff in the case. “The USFS should be ashamed for using these citizens as political pawns.”

The case began in response to Administration efforts to further reduce public involvement in the management of National Forests and has risen through the court system as judges continued to side with the right of Americans to know and comment on

Forest Service projects. While the ruling requires that timber sales and similar projects be suspended for 30 to 105 days to allow for public comment and possible appeal, the USFS is using the holiday season and such lightning rod projects as the national Christmas tree for political gain.

“The Forest Service is using scare tactics to avoid doing the right thing,” said Matt Kenna of the Western Environmental Law Center, representing conservation groups Heartwood, the Center for Biological Diversity, and Earth Island Institute. “We’re asking the court to clarify its ruling to avoid the damage that the Forest Service is doing to Americans and their rights to use the forests while being heard on the larger projects such as timber sales in their communities.”

“The Forest Service is claiming it can’t conduct road maintenance in order to get relief so that they can go ahead with timber sales in the Tongass National Forest,” said Sean Cosgrove, forest policy expert with the Sierra Club. “The Bush Administration, not conservation groups, is responsible for holding up simple projects in the wake of this court order. Public participation is a pillar of democracy in this country, and we are working on behalf of every American and their right to be involved in government decisions that affect their communities.”

The Western Environmental Law Center is a nonprofit public interest law firm that works to protect and restore Western wildlands and to advocate for the right of Western communities to a clean and healthy environment.

The Sierra Club’s members are more than 750,000 of your friends and neighbors. Inspired by nature, we work together to protect our communities and the planet. The Club is America’s oldest, largest, and most influential grassroots environmental organization.

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