

Caribou-Targhee sagebrush burning put on hold

(03/27/2008)

Patrick Reis, *Land Letter* reporter

After environmental groups threatened to ask for an injunction in federal court to stop the practice, the Forest Service agreed March 20 to suspend plans to burn sagebrush in Idaho's Berry Creek area of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest until September.

But if the environmental groups have their way, the Forest Service's plan will not be fulfilled even then.

The Native Ecosystems Council and the Alliance for the Wild Rockies filed a lawsuit against the Forest Service in a federal district court in Boise, Idaho, asking the court to declare the sagebrush burning illegal because it would damage habitat for the sage grouse, a species the Fish and Wildlife Service is currently reviewing for potential listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Numerous representatives of the Forest Service, citing their agency policy on matters pertaining to pending lawsuits, declined comment for this story.

Sagebrush provides critical habitat for sage grouse and 120 other species of songbirds and 57 mammals, including the Brewer's sparrow and the pygmy rabbit, said Sara Johnson, a biologist with the Native Ecosystems Council who previously worked for the Forest Service in the Caribou-Targhee forest.

"The sage grouse is a keystone species [that] uses sagebrush for food and to hide its nests from predators," Johnson said. She added that ensuring a healthy population of sage grouse in turn affects other species that rely on sagebrush habitat too.

But taking care of habitat is exactly what the Berry Creek sagebrush burn is designed to do, according to the Forest Service's decision memo on the project.

The memo cites the 1997 Caribou-Targhee forest management plan, which states that fire should be "used to achieve desirable soil and habitat characteristics, improve forest health, and create or maintain diversity in vegetative structure, composition and patterns."

The Forest Service considers the sagebrush currently too dense for wildlife habitat, whereas Johnson estimates that the service's prescribed density would be a death sentence for grouse attempting to hide their nests from predators.

The suit over the Berry Creek burn is the latest round in a long legal struggle over the Caribou-Targhee forest plan. In 2005, environmental groups, including the Native Ecosystems Council and the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, sued the Forest Service in District Court to stop logging of old-growth timber. The judge ruled in favor of the environmental groups, saying that the plan did not adequately preserve old-growth habitat and wildlife, and that the Forest Service had manipulated data about the forest in order to reach a desired policy conclusion.

40 years of data

In the latest round of litigation, Michael Garrity of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies accuses the Forest Service of falsely claiming to improve habitat while really destroying the habitat to create more grazing area for cattle.

Josh Tewalt of the Idaho Cattle Association dismisses those claims. Tewalt said that while sagebrush burning will help cattle ranchers in this case, it will not hurt habitat for the sage grouse. "The subspecies of sage grass in the Caribou-Targhee is vaseyana sagebrush, and it responds well to fire -- it uses it to reseed and grow," he said. "There are 40 years of data that suggest that three years after a fire there's more sagebrush and more sage grouse than before."

"The people leveling these accusations believe that you cannot have livestock grazing that is compatible with any animal habitat," Tewalt said. "Sage grouse protection just happens to be their argument [against grazing] this time around."

As described in the plan's decision memo, cattle will not be allowed to graze in the area for two years "to ensure vegetative success."

The Forest Service plans to burn the sagebrush in what they call a "mosaic pattern," whereby all the brush is not removed but instead patches remain. Of the 1,200 acres encompassed in the project, 600 will be left unburned, according to the agency plan. This will, according to the service, create a desirable density of sagebrush for wildlife habitat.

Johnson is unmoved by Tewalt's data and the Forest Service's plan. "There is a pretty neat correlation in the data between sagebrush burning and sage grouse population decline," she said, citing 40 years of brush burning in Montana's Red Rocks Lakes area.

She also called the mosaic pattern plan the "biggest sham I've ever seen." She continued, "What that means is that the patches that burn easily, the ones that are the most dense, will be gone, and those are the areas that are the most important habitat for the grouse and the rest of the species."