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Lawsuit alleges 43,000-acre forest treatment project will impact lynx

By Mateusz Perkowski, Capital Press

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An environmental group seeks to overturn the federal government's approval of 43,000 acres of forest treatments that will allegedly harm threatened lynx in Washington.

Last year, the U.S. Forest Service decided to proceed with the Bulldog project to reduce wildfire fuels and improve aquatic habitat, among other objectives, within the Colville National Forest in Northeast Washington.

Much of the project area will be treated with prescribed burning and vegetation removal but about 7,000 acres will be commercially logged and thinned in the Kettle Range portion of the Monashee Mountains.

Though the federal government determined the treatments likely will not adversely affect the Canada lynx, which is protected under the Endangered Species Act, the Kettle Range Conservation Group nonprofit has filed a lawsuit alleging that analysis was faulty.

“When combined with other logging projects and large wildfires in the Kettle Range, the Bulldog project makes an already bad situation worse and may eventually lead to the extirpation of lynx from this area,” the complaint said. “This, in turn, would directly undermine lynx recovery efforts in Washington and the lower 48 states.”

The Forest Service concluded the project was necessary because the area has “departed” from historic forest conditions due to a “fire deficit and past management actions,” increasing the danger of insect and disease problems and “uncharacteristically severe wildfires.”

“Without the treatments proposed in this project, the risk is likely to increase in the next several decades due to the trends toward a warmer and drier climate, and the project area would continue to trend away from desired conditions,” according to the decision notice.

However, the environmental plaintiff claims the forest treatments will displace the lynx and degrade its habitat for 40 years or longer, undermining efforts by the Confederated Colville Tribes and others to introduce additional cats into the area.

The complaint alleges the Forest Service decided the project wouldn't hurt the species without surveying the area for lynx, which was among several reasons the government's Endangered Species Act consultation was inadequate.

The project also falls short of national forest plan standards for lynx habitat in violation of the National Forest Management Act and should have been subject to a full "environmental impact statement" under the National Environmental Policy Act, the complaint said.

"The Bulldog project sets a dangerous precedent for how logging projects like this are conducted in the Kettle Range, an area important to and essential for lynx conservation," the lawsuit said.