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Abstract (summary)

A federal judge in Vermont yesterday blocked the US Forest Service from clearing 300 acres of woods in a remote section of the Green Mountain National Forest. It was the first time a federal court has stopped clear-cutting on federal land in the Northeast.

Logging on public land in the Pacific Northwest is one of the nation's most controversial environmental issues, but there has also been a smaller fight in the East. Yesterday's ruling caps a long campaign by activists to curb logging in both the Green Mountains and White Mountains of New Hampshire.

Judge J. Garvan Murtha ruled that the Forest Service could not carry out plans for road-building and logging in the Lamb Brook area of Readsboro, Vt., until it completes a lengthy study of whether clearing the trees would hurt black bears, songbirds and other wildlife.

Full Text

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Logging on public land in the Pacific Northwest is one of the nation's most controversial environmental issues, but there has also been a smaller fight in the East. Yesterday's ruling caps a long campaign by activists to curb logging in both the Green Mountains and White Mountains of New Hampshire.

Judge J. Garvan Murtha ruled that the Forest Service could not carry out plans for road-building and logging in the Lamb Brook area of Readsboro, Vt., until it completes a lengthy study of whether clearing the trees would hurt black bears, songbirds and other wildlife.

"This decision says that Vermont's precious forests will not be sacrificed to ill-conceived federal logging plans," said Lewis Milford of the Conservation Law Foundation, one of several groups that sued to stop the logging. "This sends a clear signal to the Forest Service: Environmental lawbreaking will not be tolerated in Vermont."

Kathleen Diehl, spokeswoman for the Forest Service in Rutland, Vt., said Murtha's decision is "a disappointment, but we're not going to stop work because of it." She said the agency would either appeal the ruling or begin an environmental impact study of the logging plan.

Diehl defended the logging near Lamb Brook, describing it as part of a plan for the entire 355,000-acre Green Mountains. She said that over a 40-year period, roughly 300 acres at Lamb Brook would be cleared of all trees, allowing more sunlight to reach the ground and improving vegetation growth.

The plan also calls for less intensive logging on an additional 900 acres. All the logging would be carried out by private contractors who bid for the right to the timber.

But environmentalists -- including the Green Mountain National Forest's former forest planner, who joined the lawsuit against his former employer -- argued that the Lamb Brook area is a poor place for logging.

The 5,561-acre forest is bounded by mountains on three sides and a lake on the fourth, creating an unusual sense of isolation for hikers and wildlife, explained Mat Jacobson, director of the Green Mountain Forest Watch. Construction of roads to reach areas to be logged would destroy that isolation, he said.

Murtha rejected the Forest Service's claim that the logging would not significantly harm the environment, charging that the Service hadn't studied the issue. For instance, he said, officials had not considered the soil erosion and noise impact of all-terrain vehicles that would gain access to the area on new logging roads.

Murtha also rejected the Forest Service's statement that the plan calls for "shelterwood harvesting," rather than clear-cutting, the woods. Murtha wrote that such claims "at times seem to misrepresent the intensity of the Forest Service's proposal."

While the Lamb Brook cutting plan may one day proceed, Forest Service officials conceded that the incessant environmental attacks already have taken a toll. Last year, loggers cut only about a quarter of the legal limit for timber harvesting in the Green Mountains.

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