

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 13, 2001

CONTACT:

Jacob Smith, Center for Native Ecosystems - (303) 247-0998

Suzanne Jones, The Wilderness Society - (303) 650-5818 x102

Ted Zukoski, Land and Water Fund - (303) 444-1188 x213

BUSH ADMINISTRATION MAY OVERTURN DECISIONS TO PROTECT WILDLIFE ON COLORADO FORESTS Conservationists Urge Agriculture Secretary to Support Ongoing Efforts; Avoid Species 'Train Wrecks'

Colorado and national conservationists today expressed concern that newly-designated Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman, may overturn decisions made by the Chief of the Forest Service to require better information about and protections for wildlife on three national forests in Colorado. In an unusual move, on February 27 Secretary Veneman decided to review decisions made by the Chief, which concluded that recently-adopted Forest Plans for the Rio Grande, Arapaho-Roosevelt, and Routt National Forests (NFs) failed to ensure the viability of scores of imperiled and declining wildlife and plant species on the three forests. The forests span nearly four and a half million acres in the state.

In the decisions at issue, the Chief concluded that the Forest Plans were illegal because they lacked essential information on the habitat needs of imperiled and declining wildlife, the locations of important habitat, and the impacts the Plans would have on these habitats. The Chief concluded that without this information, there is no guarantee that the Plans' standards are protective enough to ensure that such species would continue to exist on the Forest. Among the scores of at-risk species (24 on the Rio Grande, 44 on the Routt, and 45 on the Arapaho-Roosevelt) left unprotected by the plans are the Colorado River cutthroat trout, wolverine, western boreal toad, pine marten, and northern goshawk.

"Under the law, these three forests must ensure that native wildlife will be there for the long-haul - for our children to enjoy. The plans don't do that," said Jacob Smith, of Boulder-based Center for Native Ecosystems. "All three forests failed to gather the most basic information needed to protect these animals: where they are on the forest; how alternative plans would impact them; what kind of habitat they need to survive, reproduce, and move around; and how the plans would reduce threats to these declining species."

The rules that require forests to ensure the viability of wildlife species were mostly a product of regulations and policy put in place by Presidents Reagan and George Bush. The Chief's decisions represent a consistent interpretation of these rules. In 1999, the Chief ordered the Black Hills NF to revise its plan for similar failings. Federal court decisions have required the Forest Service to revamp forest management to provide greater protection for wildlife in the Southeastern US.

Secretary Veneman's decision to review the Chief's decision is an ominous sign, said Suzanne Jones, Assistant Director of The Wilderness Society's Four Corners office. "We hope that

Secretary Veneman reviews these appeals and doesn't decide to radically alter settled interpretations of law and policy," Jones said. "This could be an early indication as to whether the Bush Administration will uphold the law, or instead will decide that 'ignorance is bliss' when it comes to managing wildlife on Forest lands." Nine conservation groups sent a six-page letter to Secretary Veneman on February 22 expressing concern about her review of the Chief's decisions. If Secretary Veneman wishes to modify the Chief's decisions, she must act by March 27, 2001.

A decision to overturn the Chief's decisions would also undermine - and potentially derail - ongoing Forest Service efforts in Colorado to protect wildlife. In early 2000 - well before the Chief's decision on the appeals of the three Colorado Forest plan revisions - the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Region in Denver began a "coordinated species conservation process" to address at a regional level the agency's failure to comply with viability requirements in Colorado. The strategy should be complete in October.

"The whole purpose of the wildlife protection rules is to help the Forest Service get ahead of problems, and that's what the Chief and the Denver Regional office are trying to do," said Ted Zukoski, an attorney for the Land and Water Fund, a non-profit conservation law firm. "No one wants more 'train wrecks' like we saw in the Northwest Forests with the spotted owl. But that's where we may be headed if the Secretary overturns the Chief's decisions." Zukoski explained that in the Northwest, the Forest Service was repeatedly sued, and logging repeatedly halted, because for decades the agency had failed to gather needed information and put in place required protections for the northwest spotted owl and other ancient forest-dependent wildlife. "It's much smarter, more cost effective, and better for wildlife to start fixing the problem now rather than making a political statement that will only require the courts to fix things later."

The Chief's decisions came in response to appeals filed 2-3 years ago by conservationists. The Forest Service only issued the decisions after conservationists sued over the agency's unlawful delay in responding to the appeals.

Those conservation groups that appealed one or more of the Forest Plans included: Backcountry Skiers Alliance, Biodiversity Associates, Biodiversity Legal Foundation, Colorado Environmental Coalition, Colorado Grizzly Project, Colorado Trout Unlimited, Forest Guardians, High Country Citizens Alliance, Predator Conservation Alliance, San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council, Sierra Club, Sinapu, Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project, The Wilderness Society, and Wildlands Center for Preventing Roads. The LAW Fund represented the conservationists on appeals of the Rio Grande and Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forests.

The Chief's January 19, 2001 appeal decisions (each about 30 pages) are on-line at www.fs.fed.us/forum/nepa/lrmpdecisions.html. The February 22 six-page letter from conservationists to Secretary Veneman expressing concern about her review of the Chief's decisions is available via email from the LAW Fund's [Leslie Kaas](mailto:Leslie.Kaas@lawfund.org).