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APPEAL DECISION STALLS LOGGING IN POTENTIAL WILDERNESS IN FRONT RANGE NATIONAL FOREST *But Conservationists, Forest Service Move Closer to Agreement on Upper South Platte Restoration Project*

Denver, Colorado – The Rocky Mountain Region of the Forest Service on Friday issued a decision that will stall the Pike-San Isabel National Forest’s plan to log more than eight square miles – including 1,000 acres of clearcut-like “openings” -- within four roadless areas. The Forest Service had authorized logging within the roadless areas – three of which have been proposed by citizens for wilderness protection – as part of the much-larger Upper South Platte Watershed Protection and Restoration Project. The decision does not slow logging on more than 11,000 acres of roaded lands nearer communities that are part of the Project.

The decision came in response to an administrative appeal filed in September by seven conservation groups, and followed nearly a month of intensive negotiations between conservationists and the Forest Service to find common ground that could have permitted the project to go forward. The decision requires the Pike-San Isabel National Forest to determine the “cost-effectiveness” of roadless area logging, the goal of which is to reduce fire risk across a large landscape by cutting most trees in some areas, and all trees in others. Because the decision requires the Forest Service to do additional analysis and then issue a new decision that will be subject to further appeal, logging in the roadless areas is unlikely to occur within the next few months.

“Roadless areas are part of America’s natural heritage that deserve special protection,” said Rocky Smith, Forest Director of Colorado Wild. “The reason we appealed the proposed logging in roadless areas is that the Forest Service failed to show that logging in these special places is scientifically and economically justified.”

But the Land and Water Fund’s Melissa Decker, one of the attorneys representing conservation groups on the appeal, noted that discussions with the Forest Service to settle the appeal had been productive. Conservation groups met with the Forest Service officials more than a half-dozen times, and went on several site visits in attempting to craft a settlement. The discussions met an unanticipated 11th hour snag just prior to release of the appeal decision. Decker said: “We had some really good discussions with Forest Service, and we hope those will continue as the Forest Service takes another look at this project. There’s a real chance we would not oppose this type of restoration

work in these particular roadless areas if the Forest Service continues in the direction they were moving.” Decker declined to discuss the specifics of settlement discussions, which are confidential.

Last August, the Forest Service authorized the Upper South Platte Project, which calls for logging, thinning and prescribed fire treatments across 17,200 acres (more than 27 square miles) on the Pike-San Isabel National Forest roughly 30 miles southwest of Denver. The agency issued two separate decisions – one for logging and other vegetation “treatments” in non-roadless areas, and another for treatment in the four roadless areas. The decision for the roadless portion, which the Regional Forester overturned, would have allowed the Forest Service to log and burn over eight square miles, including removing virtually all of the trees on 1,000 acres and up to 75% of the trees on 4,200 acres within the Green Mountain, Gunbarrel, Rampart West, and Thunder Butte Roadless Areas. The Forest Service asserted that the Project would reduce fire risk in a watershed that is important for Denver’s water supply, while restoring the forest to a more “natural” condition similar to that before 19th century logging and 20th century fire suppression altered the forest’s character.

The groups filed the challenge in part because Forest Service failed to provide basic information – such as maps of proposed logging areas and description of proposed logging treatments. The agency also failed to conduct a thorough Environmental Impact Statement or basic analyses required under existing law – including analysis of the project’s impact on roadless areas and potential wilderness character, its impacts on fire behavior and fire risk, and the cost-effectiveness of proposed treatments. In addition, the conservation groups were concerned that the Project would fail to protect roadless values, could result in logging old, fire-resistant trees which are sparse on the landscape, and would result in an intensity of logging that was greater than necessary to reduce fire risk.

“We think the Forest Service can protect Denver’s watershed while preserving this wild forest,” said Suzanne Jones, Assistant Regional Director of The Wilderness Society’s Four Corners’ States office. “And we hope to continue working with the Forest Service to achieve that result.”

For a faxed copy of the 4-page appeal decision, please contact Ted Zukoski at the LAW Fund at (303) 444-1188, x213.