

# Ban on work in national forests affecting jobs

---

BY MARK OSWALD / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Published: Monday, October 7th, 2019 at 10:39pm

Updated: Monday, October 7th, 2019 at 10:56pm

*Copyright © 2019 Albuquerque Journal*



The Thompson Ridge Fire burns in the Jemez Mountains in 2013. A court order has halted timber management in New Mexico's national forests. (Marla Brose/Albuquerque Journal)

**SANTA FE – A court-ordered ban on timber management in New Mexico's national forests is affecting hundreds of jobs, according to the state Forest Industries Association.**

**The association has filed a formal “declaration of harm” with the Forest Service, said Brent Racher of Corona, president of the group.**

He said the association calculates that at least 400 jobs are affected by the ban, in fields ranging from those who do forest and watershed restoration work by removing small trees or underbrush to prevent wildfires under federal contracts to artisans who use forest wood to make furniture and flooring.

He said the association has estimated there will be \$9.8 million in lost revenue over six months, mostly in rural areas, if the ban remains in place.

He said his family business is losing work on a forest restoration project as long as the ban stands.

“It’s a significant impact on us, to be honest with you,” Racher said.

“We’re looking for state or private land, trying to find something to do,” he said.

Meanwhile, WildEarth Guardians – whose lawsuit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over its alleged failure to monitor the threatened Mexican spotted owl population prompted the ban on timber management – is proposing expedited mediation in the case.

The group also “would like to support an exemption (to the ban) for land not adversely affecting the spotted owl,” says WildEarth Guardians Executive Director John Horning. The ban on timber management pending further action in the court case is intended to prevent destruction of owl habitat.

Last week, the Arizona judge in charge of the case modified his order to allow traditional firewood gathering for personal use or small-scale sales after the Forest Service had stopped issuing permits for the activity. WildEarth Guardians supported the change.

Other forest management activities, including commercial timber sales, hazardous fuels reduction, forest thinning and prescribed burns to prevent wildfires, are still suspended under the order.

WildEarth Guardians maintains the Forest Service’s interpretation of the court order against timber management has been overly broad.

Horning said it’s “ridiculous” that some activities, such as clearing brush from trails and collecting trees for Native American ceremonies, are not allowed. He called on the Forest Service to release trail work and Native plant gathering for religious purposes from the ban.

“The purpose of this was to protect the spotted owl,” he said.

He noted that the Forest Service’s directive based on the court order says, “No further cutting of vegetation shall be commenced.”

“That would say you can’t cut grass,” Horning said.

He added that if the Forest Service really cared about following court orders, it would have followed a string of previous orders over 20 years on protection of the spotted owl.

“They have done nothing proactive other than incite fear and controversy,” Horning said.

Shayne Martin, a spokesman for the Forest Service, said Friday that the agency won’t go into a mediation process now, before asking the judge for clarification of his order sometime this week.

“There’s a legal process to go through,” Martin said.

He disputed that the Forest Service has gone beyond the court order in banning forest activities, saying that timber management work is defined in a federal manual.

Racher, of the Forest Industries Association, said a ban on cutting small trees for forest restoration projects is “tremendously frustrating,” because “we’ve worked long and hard to work on a collaborative process toward restoring forests and watersheds,” based on “better wildlife habitat and preventing catastrophic fires.”

“A lot of people think that the forest or timber industry is just people cutting big logs,” Racher said. “That’s not been the case since the 1990s.”

State Rep. Joseph Sanchez, D-Alcalde, issued a news release saying, “The lumber industry in New Mexico provides a significant number of jobs in rural communities and is vital to the local economy.”

“It is ridiculous that one of the poorest states in the country is also the only state in the country that cannot harvest lumber from national forest land,” he said. “Prescribed burns are critical to ensure we don’t have wildfires, particularly in rural communities, and without it, we are facing a significant human safety issue. ... Even three months (of the ban) could cause irreparable damage to many New Mexico businesses.”