

Woodpecker may alter how USFS manages its land

By Kathryn Reed

A woodpecker may change the way the U.S. Forest Service and others approach thinning projects and forest restoration work in California.

This is because on Dec. 15 the state Fish and Game Commission on a 3-1 vote said the black-backed woodpecker is a candidate for protection under the state's Endangered Species Act. (Commissioner Daniel Richards was the dissenting vote.)



Black-backed woodpecker

This is the same woodpecker species that Earth Island Justice's John Muir Project said should prevent the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit from initiating the South Shore Fuels Reduction Project and the same animal Earth Justice wants to protect in its quest to halt the Angora Fire restoration project.

It could be a year before the state decides what to do about the woodpecker. The Department of Fish & Game has until next December to prepare a status review on the species. After that, the commission votes on whether to protect the bird.

It's the Center for Biological Diversity and the Earth Island

Institute's John Muir Project that are pushing for the woodpecker's protection.

"Black-backed are heavily associated with areas burned at higher fire severities, much more so than unburned forest or low-intensity burn areas (Hutto 2008). Unless steps are taken to ensure that significant habitat is created and allowed for this species in the project area, the project could threaten the viability of the black-backed woodpecker by further reducing potential habitat across the landscape, thus violating the forest plan's requirement to ensure viability," Chad Hanson, director of the John Muir Project, wrote in his October letter to the USFS. His group wants the final environmental impact statement for the South Shore Fuels Reduction Project to be withdrawn and a supplemental environmental impact statement be prepared.

Those same arguments are being used to lobby the state.

Hanson is the author of a paper titled "Myth of 'Catastrophic' Wildfire".

A judge sided with the Forest Service over conservation groups regarding the Angora project. This meant work started this summer to thin the area – an area the John Muir Project believes should be left alone because it says it provides habitat for the woodpecker.

This is the Forest Service owned land near where 254 houses burned to the ground in June 2007.

The Forest Service says not clearing the trees will increase the threat of another catastrophic fire.

While the thinning project started this summer, the case is still tied up in the Ninth U.S. District Court of Appeals. If the state says the woodpecker should be listed as endangered, it could make the court case a moot point.

The bird is rare, with people differing over whether it's always been rare or if its numbers are in decline.