

Criminal skiers cutting down trees in wilderness

By Heather Hansman, *Outside*

In late September, a hiker in New Mexico's Santa Fe National Forest encountered a shocking sight: a several-hundred-yard swath of felled trees on a hillside in the Pecos Wilderness. Whoever did it leveled off hundreds of englemann spruce and subalpine fir trees a few inches above the roots and left the cuttings on the ground—a clear indication that it wasn't the act of an illegal timber operation or someone looking for some free firewood.

No, it was most likely perpetrated by backcountry skiers looking to set up a ski run in time for winter.

Felling trees in a national wilderness area violates the Wilderness Act and is a federal misdemeanor. Wilderness areas are the most highly protected federal land: development is prohibited in an effort to keep them as natural as possible.

Whoever is responsible for the cutting, if caught, could face six months in jail or up to \$6,000 in fines, depending on the extent of the damage, which investigators are calculating now.

The Pecos incident wasn't an isolated case of so-called glading, which involves cutting down trees to carve out enough space for makeshift ski runs. As backcountry use is increasing—the Snowsports Industry Association says sales of backcountry gear like touring-compatible ski boots and accessories were up 12 percent from 2013 to 2014—land managers are trying to find ways to encourage recreation while still regulating illegal use.

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