



*For Immediate Release*

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## **US Forest Service Logging Priorities Need 21<sup>st</sup> Century Revitalization**

**Groups challenge backcountry logging that threatens water and wildlife while consensus-driven projects to restore healthy forests and protect communities from fire are ignored.**

Denver, CO –Two conservation groups filed a lawsuit today challenging a massive logging project on National Forest lands in the Rio Grande Basin. Colorado Wild and WildEarth Guardians claim that a change of course is needed from the Obama Administration to protect Colorado’s forests that are dangerously stressed by climate change, drought, and insect epidemics. Maintaining and restoring forests to a healthy and resilient state must be the new mantra of the Forest Service, which is vested with the management of more than 10 million acres of forests in Colorado, nearly half the state’s forestlands.

“Why trade-off environmental health with timber production when you can have both?” asks Ryan Bidwell, Executive Director of Colorado Wild. “Rather than pursue win-win opportunities to restore healthy forests while also providing wood products, the US Forest Service continues to invest resources in decade-old projects that sacrifice watersheds and wildlife habitat, while providing little societal benefit.”

The Handkerchief Mesa timber sale is near Wolf Creek Pass in Southern Colorado. Miles from any community or infrastructure, the forest is still recovering from vast clearcuts and over-logging in the latter half of the 20th century. As if operating in the last century, the Forest Service approved an additional 3,400 acres of logging last year in the headwaters of the Rio Grande. With legal representation provided by the Environmental Law Clinic at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law, Colorado Wild and WildEarth Guardians filed suit challenging the logging project. The lawsuit specifically questions the government’s decision to approve additional logging in areas where past logging impacts already exceed legal standards for soil health, and where forest regeneration is impaired by the ongoing spruce budworm outbreak.

The soils in the Handkerchief Mesa area are severely prone to erosion and landslide, and, as a result, the area's streams continue to be impacted by excess sediment resulting from past logging and road construction. The Handkerchief Mesa timber sale further threatens the soil health and hydrology of this already fragile area.

"This is the headwaters of the Rio Grande and deserves the most cautious management," says Bryan Bird, Public Lands Director at WildEarth Guardians.

Current economic conditions mean changes are not limited to forests; the housing crash has contributed to the worst lumber market in US history, calling into question the wisdom of costly timber sales on public lands. In a Denver Post article from January, the Associated Press reported new-home construction had plunged to an all-time low marking the worst year on record since 1959. Also in January, the Western Wood Products Association issued a press release reporting Western mills are experiencing the largest downturn in lumber demand ever recorded.

"Pushing a logging project in the worst lumber market in history is simply foolish, especially when our national forests provide higher value to American's in clean water, recreation and fighting climate change," says Bird.

As Colorado's forests face the largest insect outbreak in recent history, the Forest Service needs to focus its scarce resources on protecting human lives and infrastructure. Scientists agree that insect epidemics are largely natural and impossible to suppress. Logging projects such as Handkerchief Mesa, far from any community, will simply aggravate stressed forests and a stressed Federal Treasury. There is growing consensus that fire hazard reduction around Colorado's communities should be a priority for lands managers.

"With all the effort being invested by stakeholders throughout Colorado to come together and work to develop consensus-based recommendations for responsible forest management, it is frustrating to see the Forest Service continue to implement an outdated and damaging agenda," says Bidwell. "Colorado's forests and its people are ready to restore healthy forests and create resilient communities, but projects like Handkerchief Mesa just keep taking us further from that reality."

"The time has come for a fresh look at National Forest management priorities," says Bird. "The climate is changing and the insect outbreak has altered Colorado's beautiful Rocky Mountain landscapes. Outdated forest management that caused these circumstances is not the answer; we must prioritize resilience and restoration."

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