

Monument would put old-growth forest at risk, not protect it

Arizona's Kaibab Plateau is a natural wonder – more than 1,000 square miles of meadows, forests and sagebrush. It's home to diverse and abundant wildlife, including a world-famous mule deer herd. We can all agree that this one-of-a-kind resource deserves the protections afforded it by the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Arizona State Land Department, the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the other governmental authorities that administer these lands. The critical issue is finding the best way to protect wildlife and the Kaibab National Forest.

The proposal to make this area a national monument largely ignores two main concerns: that wildlife on the Kaibab need active management by the state's lawful wildlife authority, the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD), and that transferring jurisdiction of the forest to an agency already \$11 billion dollars in the hole will hurt, not help forest health.

Catastrophic wildfires, not chainsaws, pose the greatest threat to old-growth forests in Arizona. In June 2006, a lightning strike on the Kaibab ignited the Warm Fire, consuming 59,000 acres including old-growth ponderosa pine, breeding territories for northern goshawks, and critical habitat for the threatened Mexican spotted owl. Cost to suppress the fire surpassed \$7 million.

Modern forest management is moving toward a restoration model –thinning overabundant small trees and creating conditions where fire can resume its normal, healthy role in the ecosystem. While the Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI) united diverse stakeholders to protect old growth, improve forest health and wildlife habitat and benefit local economies through sustainable forestry, misguided extremist litigants still seek to stop active forest management. Meanwhile, much of the plateau remains at risk, with insufficient federal funding for thinning, restoration and fire suppression.

Monument designation can't prevent catastrophic wildfire and may actually serve as a biological blowtorch, reducing this critical habitat to ashes and tying the hands of AZGFD wildlife managers sworn to protect and conserve the Kaibab's wildlife. Protections already in place will be swept aside, perhaps for years, while redundant plans are written to accomplish the exact same goals. Plans for other Arizona monuments have taken a decade or more to complete, and money better spent on the ground in Arizona will instead be spent on bureaucratic process in Washington.

Arizona's amazing wildlife requires active management, and Arizona Game and Fish must be involved not only in management planning, but in active management while plans are rewritten. Pushing scientific expertise aside to allow bureaucrats and litigators to control our public lands is not a viable way to conserve our old-growth National Forests. Science and collaboration are far more effective—and economically sustainable—than a unilateral designation and new layers of federal bureaucracy.

This proposed monument will become a super highway to litigation, delayed decisions and catastrophic fires. We'll be left with a different kind of monument: a monument to lawyers, extremism and regret for failing Arizona's wildlife.

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