

Oil and Condors a Poor Mix

The Los Padres National Forest, located along California's south-central coastline near Santa Barbara, is treasured for its striking coastal vistas, outstanding recreational opportunities and high biodiversity. Unfortunately, this national forest, home to the endangered California condor, may soon be known for sprawling oil and gas development.

▼ **SESPE WILDERNESS PROPOSED ADDITION**





“Just as the endangered California condor today flies over 150 miles in search of food, so too did my ancestors cross hundreds of miles of California coastal land and waters in search of food. Just as my ancestors used the entire forest for shelter, so do the condors – including several areas targeted for drilling. And just as we depend on our natural surroundings for survival, our environment depends on us to treat it with respect and protect it so future generations will be able to rely on it.”

–Mati Waiya
Chumash Tribe
Ventura County Star,
Commentary,
March 24, 2004

The Bush administration is currently considering new oil and gas leasing on as many as 760,000 acres of the Los Padres National Forest. An estimated 140,000 acres – 74 percent of which are wild and roadless forest lands – are given a high priority for leasing in the Forest Service study.

These coastal mountains are unusual in that they run largely east-west, forming a transition zone where the warm, dry climate to the south meets the cool, damp climate to the north. This results in a high level of biodiversity, with more than 1,500 plant and animal species calling the Los Padres home. Pockets of redwood forest are found here as well as oak woodlands, grasslands, chaparral and semi-desert shrubs.

This varied habitat supports a wide variety of animal species including the San Joaquin kit fox, tule elk, California spotted owl, bighorn sheep, bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and the critically endangered California condor. Threats to habitat of the condor are particularly problematic due to the \$35 million of federal, state and private funds recently invested in their recovery. Already condors have had risky encounters with existing oil wells, with one parent mistaking an oil pool for water, contaminating its feathers and transferring oil to its newly hatched chick (see Defenders of Wildlife, www.defenders.org/habitat/condors.html).

In all, some 20 threatened and endangered species could be adversely affected by oil and gas development. Furthermore, up to two-thirds of the sensitive oak woodlands in the Los Padres may be targeted for

▼ CUYAMA ROADLESS AREA

SESPE WILDERNESS ADDITION ▼



leasing. These oak woodlands are declining rapidly, and have recently become a conservation priority for the state.

Roadless lands threatened by the proposal include additions to the Matilija, Sespe, Dick Smith, San Rafael and Chumash Wilderness Areas. The plan could allow drilling in the watersheds of upper Sespe Creek, Matilija Creek and Piru Creek, all proposed for wild and scenic river status.

New oil and gas development would hinder recreational opportunities to fish, hunt, hike and backpack in serene, safe surroundings as streams and trails are contaminated by runoff and sedimentation, and air pollution is increased.

Unexplored archaeological sites that contain Native American history, including a permanent village and temporary habitation sites, cemeteries, rock art and places of religious significance, also could be damaged or destroyed by expanded oil and gas activity.

The Forest Service’s development plan would only produce a total of about 21 million barrels of oil – just a speck in relation to the almost 20 million barrels of oil consumed a day in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Clearly, leasing these wild places would be an unacceptable sacrifice for a small amount of oil.

Public comments overwhelmingly opposed the Forest Service’s drilling plan. Opponents to the project include the Chumash Tribe, local landowners, outdoor enthusiasts and hundreds of businesses.

In response to the community outcry, Senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein, and Representatives Lois Capps and Sam Farr have introduced legislation which would place a moratorium on new oil and gas development in the Los Padres. The legislation, entitled the Los Padres National Forest Conservation Act, was introduced in February 2004. Designation of the remaining unprotected roadless lands on the Los Padres is also needed to forestall this shortsighted energy development.

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During the last quarter-century, 130,000 acres of roadless lands on the Los Padres National Forest were lost to development – more than on any other national forest in California. Oil and gas leasing threatens to further erode these scarce and valuable wild lands.



PHOTOS / JIM ROSE