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Protesters push against logging in popular area south of Bozeman

By Alex Miller Chronicle Staff Writer

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A protestor holds a sign against logging on Kirk Hill outside of the federal building in downtown Bozeman on Monday.

Rachel Leathe/Chronicle

More than 30 people gathered on the sidewalk in front of the federal building in downtown Bozeman on Monday, wielding homemade signs calling for an end to the logging and road construction on Kirk Hill.

The protest was organized by members of the group Friends of Kirk Hill, with a goal of

putting a stop to temporary road construction and old growth timber harvesting in the area. That area is part of the thinning efforts under the Bozeman Municipal Watershed project, which encompasses 4,700 acres of land between the Hyalite and Bozeman creek drainages.

The main thrust of the project — which is a collaboration between Bozeman and the U.S. Forest Service — is to protect the city's water supply, 80% of which comes from the Hyalite and Bozeman creek drainages.

The concern is that a severe wildfire in the area would lead to ash and sediment build up that could contaminate the city's water source. The solution offered by the project is to thin both small and large diameter trees to lessen the likelihood of a severe fire.

Protesters stood in between parked cars in front of the federal building, which houses U.S. Forest Service offices, trying to get the attention of passing cars with cardboard signs raised over their heads.

Phil Knight, one of the organizers of the protest, said that it would be best to leave the forest alone. Knight created a petition on [change.org](https://www.change.org) about a year ago to stop logging and road construction on Kirk Hill ridge. So far, the petition has more than 2,800 signatures.

His concern was that the project will remove many old growth trees on the ridge and disrupt wildlife habitat, and that the construction and usage of the temporary roads will do damage that is not easily reversible.

“It's emblematic of the Forest Service's attitude toward forests, they claim they can control wildfires and reduce fire danger through logging, but there is lots of information out there

that says that doesn't work," Knight said.

Joseph Scalia III, president of the Gallatin Yellowstone Wilderness Alliance, said that the building of roads and removal of old growth trees on the Kirk Hill ridge is a continuation of removing wildland.

He said that more harm is done by continually tweaking the existing forest system instead of looking at the realities of climate change and drought that exist today. The alternative to the Bozeman Municipal Watershed project is to look at those issues head on.

"I think the alternative is to face the very painful truths of where we're at," Scalia III said.

Corey Lewellen, Bozeman district ranger for the Custer Gallatin National Forest, said that trees with a diameter of 35 inches or more would be left alone. Some of the old growth trees, like stands of lodgepole pine, are already in bad condition because of mountain pine beetles.

Those trees are likely to go because they could be readily available fuel for a wildfire, Lewellen said. The goal in thinning trees on the ridge is to create more defensible space for firefighters, and thinning on the ridge makes it easier to change the course of — or stop — a fire rather than battling it midway up the slope.

The temporary roads built in the area will be completely "obliterated" after the project is completed, but traces of the roads will take time to disappear, he said.

"It definitely takes time for these things to recover, I mean it's going to take a few years for the grass, the shrubbery and the trees on that road prism to start growing again," Lewellen

said. “You’ll be able to see where the road used to be.”

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