

Local News

U.S. agriculture chief sees how new rule aids timber salvaging

By Ted Lutz / Kane Republican / Friday, April 23, 2004

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann M. Veneman, in her Earth Day visit to the Allegheny National Forest, saw first-hand how new federal regulations have enabled the Forest Service to cut red tape and salvage storm-downed timber before it further degrades.

Her first stop on a vehicle tour of the forest was at the Timberline ATV trailhead on Route 948 in Highland Township. There she exited a Forest Service van and stood with Rep. John Peterson (R-Pleasantville) to look at the salvage site where timber was harvested last month by crews from Kane Hardwood.

Veneman, wearing a traditional green Forest Service jacket, listened intently as Carol Burd explained how new federal "categorical exclusions" regulations permitted the Forest Service to salvage the timber without conducting the normal extensive environmental studies. Burd, a Kane resident, is serving as the acting ranger for the Marienville District while Ranger Leon Blashock of Ridgway is on assignment at the regional forest office in Milwaukee.



According to a report issued by the Forest Service, "categorical exclusions are a category of actions which do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment." Emergency projects covered under this program do not require "an environment assessment nor an environmental impact statement," the Forest Service.

The windstorm of July 21, 2003 packed wind gusts as high as 80 mph and uprooted many trees in Kane and the surrounding national forest. Electrical power was lost for nearly a week in some areas. A tornado spawned by the same storm toppled the midsection of the historic Kinzua Bridge near Mt. Jewett.

Thousands of trees were downed in the 513,000-acre national forest. Some foresters believe as much as \$50 million in timber-including maple and expensive cherry-lies on the forest floor due to the storm.

Secretary of Agriculture Ann M. Veneman, U.S. Representative John Peterson (R-PA) and U.S. Forest Service representative Joel Holtrop answer questions following Veneman's speech at Kane Hardwood, a division of the Collins Company, located in Kane. Veneman toured blowdown sites on the Allegheny National Forest. A \$55,000 grant was presented to the U.S. Forest Service Research Laboratory in Irvine. Dr. Susan Stout, research scientist, accepted the grant money. Photo by Anne Smith

Even with the new "categorical exclusions (CE)" program, it took the Forest Service about nine months to complete its first salvage work in an area not connected with a previous sale.

The six-acre Timberline ATV trailhead site was chosen as the first salvage project under the CE program for several reasons. First, the site is located in a highly visible area where thousands bring their ATVs to ride the 38-mile Timberline Trail, which will re-open for the summer season on May 28. Secondly, the site abuts Route 949, eliminating the need for the construction of an access road.

Kane Hardwood paid about \$9,000 for the timber taken from the downed trees at the salvage harvest site, Burd said Thursday. As part of the contract, Kane Hardwood crews used logging machinery to push the uprooted stumps back to an upright position to improve the appearance of the site. The salvage work was completed last month.

Burd said the Forest Service is hoping to offer 19 more salvage sales under the CE program over the next "five or six months." She said these sales should produce 3.3 million board feet (mbf) with an estimated value of \$2.5 million.

Under the CE program, a salvage area is limited to 250 acres, according to the Forest Service. Various other criteria is used in determining prospective sites for salvage sales under the CE program.

Some storm salvage work was included in timber sales that were awarded last year. Through February, more than 800 mbf was salvaged as part of these sales.

The timber from uprooted trees littering the forest is degrading more and more every day. But, as Rep. Peterson pointed out, the trees would simply continue to "rot" on the forest floor without the CE program that allows for quicker salvage operations.

Raised on a peach farm in California, Veneman told the Kane Republican that this was her first visit to a national forest in the Eastern U.S. since she became the 27th Secretary of Agriculture Jan. 20, 2001.

After viewing the salvage site at the ATV trailhead in Highland, Secretary Veneman rode in a 10-vehicle caravan through the forest to the Kane Experimental Forest complex near Twin Lakes.

The entourage stopped briefly at six designated viewing areas along Forest Road 185 en route to the Experimental Forest site. The sites were numbered and gave Veneman a chance to look out the van window and see:

- A shelterwood seed preparation harvest. In this area, the overstory tree canopy is reduced to provide more sunlight to seedlings in the regeneration of the forest.
- A fenced off area where herbicide is used to reduce ferns which inhibit regeneration. The fencing is designed to keep deer from eating the seedlings.
- A delayed overstory removal project. This area contains dead and dying trees, which are part of the East Side Project which has been held up by litigation. A federal judge recently upheld the Forest Service in nine of 10 issues in the lawsuit

filed by the Allegheny Defense Project and the Sierra Club. The Kane-based Allegheny Forest Alliance supported the Forest Service in the case in federal court in Pittsburgh.

- A regeneration success project. This area shows how regeneration has produced 15-foot tall cherry, maple and beech trees. These trees are not yet ready for harvest in the state's only national forest.
- Blowdown caused by the windstorm. Veneman had an up-close look at the destructive forces of nature. In this area, numerous large trees were uprooted and tipped over by the windstorm last summer.

Veneman sat along side Rep. Peterson during a lunch break at the Experimental Forest conference room. About 45 were present for the lunch, which featured a program presented by Dr. Susan Stout, head of the forest research center in Irvine.

Forest Service security agents dressed in business suits and Forest Service law enforcement personnel in marked vehicles accompanied the group during Veneman's Earth Day visit to the Kane area.

Veneman spoke during a post-lunch program at Kane Hardwood before departing for Bradford Regional Airport and a plane trip back to Manassas, Va.