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THE STATE

## Rollback of Wilderness Protections Decried

■ The state's resources chief objects to a new federal policy that could affect such sites as the Headwaters forest.

By Julie Cart, Times Staff Writer

A Bush administration decision to limit wilderness protection on federal land could imperil several sensitive sites in California — including the Headwaters Forest Reserve, a grove of giant redwoods purchased by the state and federal governments for \$480 million in 1999.

The administration spelled out its new policy in an April settlement with the state of Utah.

In a strongly worded letter to Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton sent Thursday, state Resources Secretary Mary Nichols objected to the agency's directive to the Bureau of Land Management that only land set aside for wilderness review prior to 1993 would be afforded special protection. Nichols charged that because of the change in policy, "cherished emblems of California's natural heritage" would be permanently denied wilderness protection.

In addition to Headwaters, the letter lists BLM holdings such as Carrizo Plain National Monument in southern San Luis Obispo County, groves of giant sequoias next to Kings Canyon National Park and Payne Ranch in Colusa County and says, "[the policy] shatters the expectations of average citizens that the federal government will protect as wilderness lands of extraordinary beauty and biological importance."

Norton's settlement resolved a lawsuit in which Utah claimed that the Interior Department overstepped its authority in continuing to consider areas for wilderness designation or manage lands as de facto wilderness after 1993.

The April 11 agreement reversed an order by former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt that gave interim wilderness protection to 2.6 million acres of BLM land in Utah.

The new policy, in effect, nullifies the guidelines by which the BLM identifies currently unprotected land for wilderness characteristics.

"This unprecedented interpretation effectively prevents BLM from declaring that federal lands purchased after 1993 can qualify for wilderness," Nichols' letter said. "It also shuts the door on the possibility of designating federal lands that BLM had already determined should be accorded wilderness protections after 1993."

California's BLM office manages 76 wilderness areas, which constitute 60% of the agency's total national wilderness holdings. According to the California Wilderness Coalition, more than 113,000 acres of BLM land in the state were being studied as potential wilderness.

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State BLM officials said they have yet to receive instructions on how to carry out the new policy.

"They took away our directions as to what we are supposed to do regarding wilderness. We have been waiting for new directions," said Tony Danna, BLM's deputy state director for resources.

John Wright, an Interior Department spokesman, said Friday that the department's view is that "there is no further need for additional wilderness recommendations." He said BLM land with wilderness characteristics would still be afforded protection. But Wright said the protection might be less than what has been afforded in the past and he did not rule out the possibility that activities such as motorized recreation, grazing, mining and logging would be allowed.

In California, Danna said land currently managed as de facto wilderness would probably continue to be until a new management plan is written to conform with the new policy.

Danna said that a new management plan is being prepared for the Headwaters forest. A draft plan issued by the BLM last year called for setting aside more than half of the Headwaters area as a wilderness study area.

The forest has been a contentious and protracted issue for California, which put \$130 million of state funds toward the purchase of the largest grove of ancient redwoods in private ownership.

The reserve, in Humboldt County, contains a handful of threatened and endangered species as well as groves of 1,000-year-old trees.

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