

## Cayuga logging project back for debate

By **CHAD DALLY**  
Staff Writer

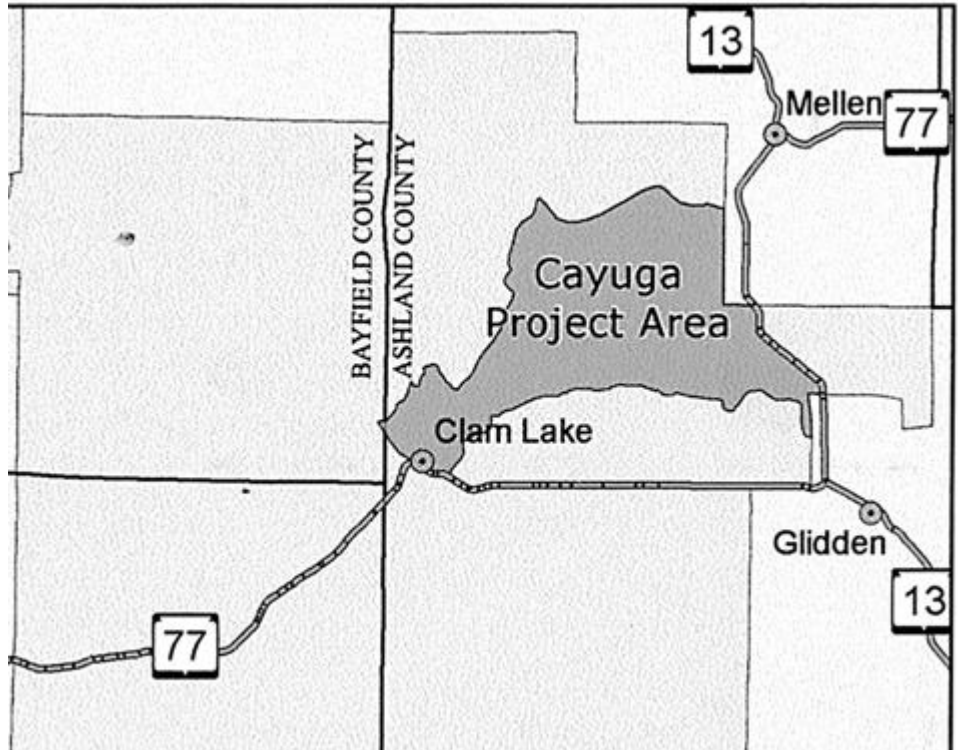
Published: Monday, July 21, 2008 10:55 AM CDT

A controversial logging project in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest is again up for debate, with U.S. Forest Service officials claiming they have rectified previous issues and critics charging that the agency still is coming up short.

The Cayuga project, located northeast of Clam Lake in the national forest's Great Divide District, includes the harvest of approximately 5,200 acres of timber, nearly 11 miles of road construction and takes slightly more than 12 miles out of public use.

The Forest Service revised its environmental impact statement (EIS) after Judge Lynn Adelman ruled in 2005 that the agency's previous EIS failed to properly assess the cumulative effects of the project as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

Forest Service officials say the new EIS is more in-depth, and takes into account new information about the area's wildlife, but environmental advocates say it still does not go far enough.



"While we think what the Forest Service has done on Cayuga is an improvement, we still think there are things they could've done better," said Katie Dixon, an attorney with the Environmental Law & Policy Center. The ELPC, along with the Madison-based Habitat Education Center, challenged the Forest Service in court on the Cayuga project, and both groups continue to challenge a number of other proposed timber harvests in the CNNF.

Much of the controversy swirling around the Cayuga project is based on one of the forest's smaller inhabitants, the pine marten, which is Wisconsin's only endangered mammal and is considered by the Forest Service to be a Regional Forester's Sensitive Species worthy of extra protection.

There are between 20 and 40 marten on the Chequamegon side of the CNNF, and many, if not all,

occupy territory around the proposed Cayuga site.

In the three years since the previous EIS was thrown out, the Forest Service added a new alternative to the Cayuga plan that would temporarily defer logging of roughly 1,000 acres in areas known to be marten habitat.

While that alternative is listed in the revised EIS as the preferred option, resulting in 13.8 million board feet of timber, Great Divide District Ranger Connie Cheney said all of the alternatives are still possible.

"We may or may not select that alternative, but because of the small size of the population ... we developed another alternative that will temporarily defer harvesting in the area surrounding where marten were actually located," she said.

Deferring harvest in marten territory is one of the improvements that Dixon and Howard Lerner, executive director of the Environmental Law & Policy Center, found in the revised EIS.

Yet Lerner said the EIS still does not go far enough in examining the cumulative impacts of the Cayuga sale on wildlife such as the marten, red-shouldered hawk and northern goshawk in relation to other harvest projects, not only on national forest land, but also on nearby private land.

"The Forest Service continues to look at the Cayuga sale in isolation rather than the combined impacts of its multiple timber sales and road-building projects across the national forest," Lerner said. "The fact is, critical habitat for wildlife species does not exist just within the artificial boundary lines of one particular timber sale, but has a much broader reach through the national forest."

David Zaber, vice-president of the Habitat Education Center, added that the revised EIS still does not adequately take into account other Forest Service projects, such as the 9,160-acre Twentymile project directly west of Cayuga where pine marten also have been found.

While the agency under one alternative withdrew harvesting from known marten habitat, it will chop away surrounding areas and reduce other potential habitat, Zaber said.

"There's marten south of the Iron River, near Spillerberg Lake, that's still open to logging," he said. "They're going to be logging right up to the boundaries of the research natural area on the south side of the Cayuga, where trumpeter swans live and right next to old-growth cedar."

Cheney disagreed with criticism of the cumulative effects analysis and said the Forest Service went "way beyond" the boundaries of the Cayuga and did include private land in its analysis. As a result, the Forest Service found what Cheney described as "ample suitable habitat" into which the marten and other wildlife could move, and that additional habitat continues to come into being as more trees mature.

Jonathon Gilbert, a biologist with the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission, isn't so sure that's the case.

"I would not be so definitive as (Cheney) that there's plenty of suitable habitat elsewhere," he said. "There may be, there may not be — the point is we don't know. If there's no place for these animals to go and hide out while they're cutting their home, that's not going to be any good."

But Joe Timmerman, who recently retired as president of Midwest Forest Products, questioned whether excluding harvests in marten territory will be any good, either.

"If indeed the pine marten populations are declining in those areas, and there has not been any activity in those areas, how can they assume any activity in those areas would be detrimental to the pine marten?" Timmerman asked. "I'm wondering, is there possibly other reasons for pine marten decline such as trapping — legal or illegal — an increase in fisher populations, poor weather during the breeding season, any number of 100,000 reasons other than timber harvest?"

Logging at a loss?

While one of the six alternatives for the Cayuga project is cutting nothing, the economic analysis in the EIS shows that the other five all would result in a net loss of money for the Forest Service.

That means the agency would spend between \$100,000 and \$162,000 to complete the project, depending on which alternative is selected. The sixth, "preferred" option would be at a loss of \$154,650 between the cost and the benefit.

"Why is the Forest Service doing timber sales at an economic loss, while still destroying natural resource values?" Lerner asked. "We should expect smarter action from our government agents."

Cheney said one reason for the economic loss is the amount of planning involved, which has included two rounds of environmental impact statements.

"In most of our timber sale projects on this forest, we've been above cost," she said. "This one has been a little different because of the amount of analysis that's gone into it."

Timmerman was more blunt, and said groups like the Habitat Education Center bear some responsibility for putting the project in the red.

"They appeal every single project, make (the Forest Service) go back to court, hire lawyers, redo plans and spend more money writing projects," he said. "Can you imagine them being above cost with all of those expenses? It's not going to happen."

But Timmerman also pointed to the "fixed costs" of salaries, operations, maintenance of equipment and other factors as having an impact on profit from any timber sale.

"You've got a national forest with an extremely large staff and an extremely large budget," he said. "Whether or not they sell one stick, they're still going to spend the money."

It's possible, however, the Forest Service underestimated the economic benefit of the project, as the EIS notes "recent history has shown that stumpage base values are always bid higher."

There is also a trickle effect to the harvest project, as the Forest Service estimates that between 229 and 433 jobs would be provided or sustained, depending on which alternative is chosen.

Timmerman said what he sees as the overall benefit of timber harvests to local economies is a big reason why the Forest Service should open up more land to logging.

"There is so much of the forest that is not touched already that when you have the opportunity to actually manage and do something that can contribute to economies, return money to schools, provide jobs and actually be utilized by people, I think they should take the opportunity."

And preventing logging in the CNNF does nothing to reduce the demand for wood products, Timmerman said.

"It's just going to come from somewhere else, and it's probably going to come from an area that receives less attention, less professional management," he said. "It impacts the quote-unquote 'environment' even more."

Both Zaber of the Habitat Education Center and Lerner stressed that they are not against logging in general. In fact, Zaber said he resigned from a previous position with the Sierra Club because of its strict no-cut policy.

"We are not about putting people out of work," Zaber said. "This is about making sure we have a long-term, sustainable, high-value timber industry, particularly with the large industrial forests."

But Cheney said there's another benefit of the project that cannot be measured in the cost-benefit analysis: to continue the agency's goal of restoring a northern hardwood ecosystem and "promoting forest health."

Zaber refuted that concept as well and called the process "biological homogenization."

"When they talk about diversifying by logging, what they're doing is making everything seem alike," he said. "There's no difference between these areas because they've all been logged ... those areas are diversifying on their own right now."

Into the forest or back in court

Now that the public comment period for the revised environmental impact statement is closed, the Forest Service will respond to those comments and any new information it receives to develop a final EIS and record of decision for the project within a few months, Cheney said.

Depending on changes made to the final EIS and the alternative chosen, groups like the ELPC and Habitat Education Center could choose to file an administrative appeal, which would initiate an informal dispute resolution process toward a settlement, Lerner said.

If an administrative appeal is denied, the project could head back to federal court. But Lerner said he hopes that can be avoided.

"If they do (improve the draft), there'd be nothing better from our perspective than to say the Forest Service has done it right this time and we're proud of them," he said. "Maybe it took a kick in the rump from the federal court, but so be it — we're now where we should be and let's move forward."

Courtesy of the Wisconsin DNR

**PINING AWAY** — The pine marten, Wisconsin's only endangered mammal, is at the center of a debate about a logging project in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. One option in the project would temporarily defer timber harvesting in known marten territory.