

Judge drops EPA out of spotted owl hearings



PORTLAND, Ore. (AP)

An administrative law judge allowed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to drop out of the "God Squad" hearings over the northern spotted owl Wednesday, drawing howls of protest from environmentalists.

Victor Sher, a lawyer for the Portland Audubon Society and nine other environmental groups, said the EPA move smacked of more political manipulation of the process by the Bush administration.

The ruling came on the first day of three weeks of hearings by Judge Harvey Sweitzer. Information gathered will go

to the Endangered Species Committee. The committee must then decide whether to exempt some logging on federal lands in Western Oregon from threatened species protections for the spotted owl.

Lawyers for environmental groups fear the move could make it more difficult to introduce evidence in which the EPA has criticized the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. The EPA claimed the BLM has not prepared an adequate environmental impact statement before seeking the exemption for the 44 timber sales covering 4,000 acres.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service denied permission for BLM to offer the

timber, saying logging the forest would threaten the survival of the owl.

EPA lawyers sought to withdraw from the hearings on grounds that there are other ways to acquire evidence from the agency.

Melinda Bruce, an assistant Oregon attorney general, said the action didn't appear to be adequately grounded in law and could taint the hearings.

In opening statements, attorneys seeking the exemption said the committee must override the "high priests of the biological cult" and allow the timber sales in spite of threats to the northern spotted owl.

Mark Rutzick, lawyer for the North-

west Forest Resource Council, said there is overwhelming evidence that timber sales would have regional economic impacts and could boost the national economy as well.

The Fish and Wildlife Service listed the owl as a threatened species in 1990, setting in motion new, major restrictions on timber harvesting in owl habitat areas.

Under federal law, approving an exemption to the Endangered Species Act requires showing there are no feasible alternatives and that economic benefits would be of regional and national significance.

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