



House Natural Resources Committee Forum on Giant Sequoia  
Friday, April 29, 2022  
Testimony by Denise England, Grants and Resources Manager, County of Tulare

Video Clip: <https://vimeo.com/565949881/c9065382c6> (first 45 seconds)

This video depicts the SQF fire burning through a residence in Tulare County. The owners watched their home burn through their Nest cameras. Tulare County residents, communities, and economy have been adversely impacted by the lack of active forest management on US Forest Service lands. Tulare County is roughly the size of the state of Connecticut with approximately 50% of its land mass owned by the Federal Government. Tulare County is home to some of the largest Giant Sequoia trees in the world. These trees and the surrounding natural lands attract hundreds of thousands of people to the region every year. Historically, the Federal lands produced a vibrant timber industry that provided economic stability and opportunity to both mountain and valley communities. This coupled with tourism played a key role in Tulare County's economy.

Giant Sequoias, and their mixed conifer ecosystems, are threatened from numerous stressors, including drought, beetle attack, and especially high-severity fire. Over the past decade, increasingly devastating wildfires have destroyed Giant Sequoia groves, critical habitat, and entire communities. The total cost of lost environmental infrastructure is difficult to put a price tag on, but it is great. The loss of Monarch Giant Sequoia trees outstrips the price of lost housing and infrastructure because a Monarch Giant Sequoia is irreplaceable in our lifetime.

High severity fire in Sierra Nevada forests is caused by high accumulations of forest fuels coupled with severe droughts. High accumulations of forest fuels are a result of two main conditions: 1) Unnaturally dense forests with heavy accumulations of dead and live forest fuels from the suppression of naturally occurring wildfires over the past 130 years; and 2) High mixed conifer tree mortality in recent years from drought and increased bark beetle kill. While the US Forest Service has committed to change and Congress has provided a number of tools to facilitate change, on-the-ground reality remains vastly unchanged.

NEPA and ESA reform are paramount to successfully managing today's forests. For example, recently the US Forest Service received a streamlined categorical exemption for hazard tree removal. The US Forest Service is not utilizing this categorical exemption on the SQF and Windy Fire burn scars for fear of litigation. Organizations use NEPA and the ESA to litigate projects that protect and improve critical ecosystem infrastructure, which is counter to the intent of both Acts. As such, reform of both is desperately needed.

Due to the lack of active forest management, much of Tulare County's economic infrastructure supporting forest products are shuttered or limited. Tulare County once had three active sawmills, now there is only one with limited capacity. The result are scores of log decks waiting to be transported to market. There are currently log decks from the 2016 Cedar fire still waiting to be moved to market. After five years, the quality of the timber is compromised, and this useful resource is being wasted. Tulare County had two energy facilities to convert the woody biomass from the forest into clean energy. Those plants are now closed. There is interest and desire to re-open and expand the forest product industry in Tulare County, however, a commitment of input material over a dedicated timeframe is paramount in making such investments.

In closing, Tulare County has experienced detrimental impacts to communities, resident's quality of life, economy, and critical environmental infrastructure from catastrophic wildfires. Our County has been covered in smoke for the past five summers due to wildfires. We have lost more than 1,000 Monarch Giant Sequoias, which cannot be replaced within the next three generations. Change must occur. NEPA and ESA reform is crucial to saving the remaining Giant Sequoia groves. A full toolbox, with operable tools, must be provided to the Forest Service and others to achieve active forest management to reduce wildfire risk and create healthy ecosystems. Returning prescribed fire to the land, allowing mechanical operations where effective and efficient, and utilizing forest products to remove the material off the land are critical in protecting these Giants.