

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony on
Oversight Hearing on
Management of the Stanislaus National Forest
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Before the
US House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
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Good afternoon, Madame Chair and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Tom Nelson. I am a Registered Professional Forester from Redding, California, and am here today speaking on behalf of Sierra Pacific Industries. Thank you for the opportunity to express our views on issues which affect management of public lands within the Stanislaus National Forest.

Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI) is a privately owned, family run business whose assets include 1.3 million acres of land, 13 sawmills, 2 millwork plants, a window manufacturing division, 7 co-generation power plants, and more than 3200 employees, all within California. In the immediate vicinity, we currently operate one sawmill at Standard, one at Chinese Camp, and a bark facility at Keystone. All three of these were acquired from the Fibreboard Corporation in 1995.

From our perspective, most of the issues which affect management of public lands on the Stanislaus National Forest are very similar to those on other National Forests in the Sierra Nevada. This is not surprising, since most of the major land management decisions are actually made somewhere in Washington, DC, not in the Regional Office nor here in Sonora.- These are, in fact, political decisions, not necessarily based on the best available scientific evidence. A case in point is management for the California spotted owl.

The California spotted owl is not now, nor has it ever been, listed as either "threatened" or "endangered" under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). Like its close relative, the northern spotted owl, the California spotted owl is also not listed under the State of California's ESA. Based on this, one might surmise that populations of this species are stable, well distributed, and sufficient in numbers to insure its continued survival. And yet, almost entirely because of Federal efforts to "protect" this unlisted owl, timber sale levels in the Sierra Nevada have dropped by more than 75% since 1990.

Ironically, these policies may turn out to be disastrous for the owl as well as the forest products industry-- as we may be protecting the spotted owl to death. Scientists from the CASPO (California Spotted Owl) Technical Team found that the greatest single threat to owl habitat and survival in the Sierra Nevada is catastrophic wildfire. Their recommendation to the US Forest

Service was to implement a massive program of understory thinning. The goal of this thinning was to

protect the remaining large trees by reducing the levels of fuel (both live and dead) as well as breaking up the fuel continuity (fuel "ladders").

Unfortunately, very little thinning has been accomplished on these National Forests while the green fuels continue to accumulate dramatically. As illustrated by the attached graph, total annual timber growth on the CASPO Forests is more than 2 billion board feet while timber sales sold within the same area are now well below 500 million board feet. How can we ever reduce the fire risks when the total amount of green fuel is growing at a rate that is four times greater than what we are removing?

Just recently, another example of this problem was cited by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt at President Clinton's Lake Tahoe summit. Secretary Babbitt said that he was going back to Washington with two numbers on his mind, numbers that concerned him greatly. Those numbers were 1120011 and 1110,000". These numbers represent the actual area of fuel reduction occurring within the Lake Tahoe basin each year (200 acres) and the desired amount if we are ever to reverse the potentially disastrous trend apparent around the lake (10,000 acres/year). This same problem exists throughout the Sierra Nevada, with the same disparity between needed treatment and actual accomplishment. It is an enormous problem and we are losing ground, not gaining.

A number of well-financed, urban-based environmental groups do not agree with this assessment. Instead, they continue to issue press releases from their corporate offices in the Presidio that claim that this strategy to reduce fire danger and improve forest health is "just an excuse for more logging". And logging, they say, is the real culprit-- the true reason that wildfires are so destructive in the Sierra Nevada. Some have even adopted a position for no more commercial logging on Federal lands as their solution.

For anyone who has seen the devastation from the recent Ackerson and Rogge Fires near Sonora, this position will seem ludicrous-- most of the Ackerson Fire **was** within Yosemite National Park in areas where logging has never taken place. If past logging were truly the problem, then large areas of virgin, unlogged forest in Yosemite should not have been destroyed by catastrophic wildfire-- but they were.

Sierra Pacific supports Forest Service efforts, especially those which originate at the local Forest level, to reduce fire risks through carefully planned logging. We see this as a very urgent problem that must be met with immediate and aggressive action-- further delays will only increase the amount of public land damaged and the buildup of fuel for future wildfires.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

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