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Clear-cut foes take their case on the road

Sierra Pacific Industries logging subject of Highway 4 protest

By Craig Koscho

Protesters took to the highway in Arnold late Friday afternoon [May 24] to let weekend tourists know about the clear-cutting of trees around Calaveras, Big Trees State Park.

Redding-based Sierra Pacific Industries has been clear-cutting areas around Arnold for two years, and recently began logging on three new parcels in Tuolumne County bordering Calaveras, Big Trees State Park. Members of the Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch citizens' group waved signs Friday along Highway 4 with messages such as "Variable Retention Harvesting is a P.R. Scam" and "We Support Responsible Logging Not Clear-cutting." About a dozen people carried signs shortly after the protest began at 4 p.m. Their ranks later swelled to about 25 people according to Forest Watch representative Alice Trinkl.

The protest follows close on the heels of a lawsuit the group filed May 15 against SPI for its three timber harvest plans in Tuolumne County. The Cedar Flat, Curry and Base Camp logging operations cover about 1,200 acres on which SPI plans clear-cut and visual retention harvesting. Visual retention leaves a few trees behind in each 20-acre logging unit. Environmentalists, such as Forest Watch representative Warren Alford, have long maintained that cutting 95 to 99 percent of the trees in a unit is still clear-cutting and endangers forest health. Both clear-cutting and variable retention practices involve the application of herbicides and the seeding of new pine trees, creating what's known as a tree plantation. SPI officials could not be reached for comment on Monday.

Alford and Forest Watch board member Addie Jacobson want state forest and water officials to consider the cumulative impacts of SPI's clear-cutting proposals throughout the state, which total about 1 million acres, Alford said. That's the question we want answered," he said, adding that now, when a large harvest plan is challenged, SPI pulls it from consideration, and resubmits the proposal in smaller increments. He and Jacobson are especially concerned about the potential threat to Calaveras Big Trees State Park posed by SPI's newer plans, particularly in light of the park's 150th anniversary celebration, which kicks off this weekend.

The three newer timber harvest plans, along with previous logging in Calaveras County, will leave the park a virtual island surrounded by clear-cuts, said Alford. More than 200,000 people sign the park's guest book in a year, said Jacobson, illustrating the park's immense appeal. The fact that the harvest plans are on private property cannot be used as an excuse to jeopardize the rest of the land, she said. Alford was even more adamant, saying the new plans will leave the park with insufficient buffers. "They may as well take the chainsaws to the Big Trees for the effect it will have on the park's ecosystem," he said.

Friday's placard carriers viewed the Memorial Day weekend as the perfect time to get their message out to tourists and second-home residents. "There are a lot of the visitors and homeowners who don't know what's going on in the forest," eight-year Arnold resident Bunny Firebaugh said. While the demonstrators received a few catcalls from some passing drivers, most motorists were receptive to their message, honking their horns in support or giving a "thumbs up" to the protesters.

What do opponents of clearcutting ultimately want from SPI? "A commitment for more responsible logging

from an aesthetic and environmental stand," said Kathy Malone, a three-year resident of Arnold. "We would like to see logging occur in a way that water and wildlife won't be irreparably damaged," Alford said Monday. Jacobson supports a forum in which biologists, water quality people and others would determine the proper way to cut forests. "What I'm looking for is responsible sustainable harvesting and we need to define what that is," Jacobson said. That might even include some type of variable retention harvesting, Alford said, as long as the lots retain several big trees, create broader buffers between harvest areas, and include larger, downed trees that help keep moisture in the soil. "That's dramatically different from removing all the vegetation, applying the herbicides ... and planting corn rows of pine trees," he said.