

Valentine's Day press conferences zero in on SPI's logging practices

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By Staff Report (editor@ledger-dispatch.com)

At Valentine's Day press conferences in Murphys and Redding earlier this month, Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch and ForestEthics, an international nonprofit, released the results of an ongoing business sign-on campaign to lobby Sierra Pacific Industries to end clearcutting practices.

The gatherings took place at the Murphys Library and in Redding at the intersection of Market and Tehama streets on Feb. 14. In conjunction with the Redding activities, SPI neighbors in Calaveras County presented "Businesses With a Heart" awards to businesses that signed onto a letter urging SPI to reform its logging practices.

More than 525 businesses, ranging from large companies like Patagonia to small outfits like Bridges Construction, have signed the letter. Of these businesses, 160 are near communities adjacent to SPI's clearcutting. In rural Calaveras County, 125 businesses have joined. This includes members of a recently-organized "Contractors for Responsible Forestry" group.

SPI is the largest landowner in California, owning more than 1.7 million acres across the Sierra Nevada, with plans to clearcut and convert to tree plantations up to 1 million acres within this century, an area 1.5 times larger than Yosemite National Parks. SPI is also the largest landowner in Calaveras County, owning approximately 74,000 acres of the county's forested land.

"Businesses in Calaveras County and around the nation have shown they recognize the devastating effects of massive range-wide clearcutting in the Sierra Nevada and the urgent need to end this practice that belongs in the last century," said Ron Szymanski, vice president of EPFW.

Residents living in the shadow of SPI operations pointed out they weren't anti-logging per se, but were united in calling for less aggressive practices.

"Logging is a part of California history," said Gary Orwig of Big Bend. "I've lived in the area for 28 years and timber companies have always operated on land next door to me. But in the past, they used sustainable harvesting techniques, and it was easy to walk through the area after they logged. There was lots of habitat for wildlife, and the beauty was still visible. But now Sierra Pacific Industries is clearcutting so much of the land. Walking through a clearcut is a devastating experience."

SPI spokesman Mark Pawlicki said sustainable harvesting is exactly what the forest products company is doing.

"We're in the business of maintaining healthy forests and providing wood products for consumers," he said. "We believe healthy trees, good water quality and enduring wildlife habitats are the result of sound forest management practices."

That may be so, but those who attended the two Feb. 14 events dispute SPI is using those practices. Marily Woodhouse is a Tehama County resident fighting a proposal by SPI to clearcut more than 800 acres above her town of Manton. The plan, recently approved by the California Department of Fire and Forestry, calls for logging near one of the principal sources of drinking water for the community. Of the 300 people living in Manton, Woodhouse convinced more than 130 to sign a letter urging CAL FIRE to halt the plan.

Her neighbors voiced concerns regarding the serious health and quality of life consequences of clearcutting on both the environment and people. These include increased fire risk, the loss of plant and animal species, and exposure to dangerous herbicides used in the clearcutting process. While more and more companies are taking steps to become environmental leaders, environmentalists say SPI is using the same practices they've been employing for years.

Pawlicki said SPI's 100-year plan, adopted in 1999, has cleared the state's review process and that the company's logging practices are in compliance with multiple state agencies.

State approval hasn't satisfied some. Rocky Bridges of Bridges Construction said he was working on a campaign asking other builders to boycott SPI products until the timber industry giant change its harvesting practices.

"As a builder I want to make clear that I will not compromise the health of our forests or communities to provide homes for California residents," he said.

Local residents are working with ForestEthics on a campaign to get SPI to stop clearcutting and adopt Forest Stewardship Council certification, an independent forestry standard.

"The intentions of SPI are clear," said Susan Shoaff, owner of Sustenance books. "A clearcut makes the timber company the most money in the shortest amount of time. This does not take into account the loss of biodiversity, fragmentation of habitat or loss of jobs in the logging industry, all of which result from clearcutting."

"As our economy becomes increasingly dependent on recreational tourism, we are concerned about preserving the natural surroundings that give birth to our county's tourism industry," said Jill Seale, owner of Sierra Nevada Adventure Co.

SPI clearcuts now diminish the scenic value along the Ebbetts Pass National Scenic Byway.

"SPI is missing a tremendous opportunity by continuing their heavy-handed logging methods and conversion to tree plantations," said Josh Buswell of ForestEthics. "The market is clearly going green, but SPI is, sadly, missing the boat."

That drum is being beaten in Amador County as well, where Foothill Conservancy Director Katherine Evatt said the logging company's damaging footprint can be seen.

"Last year we submitted comments on an SPI logging plan in the North Fork Mokelumne River canyon that covers more than 1,700 acres," Evatt said. "It's not all clearcuts, but for the first time, SPI is planning to clearcut on the north-facing slopes of the Devil's Nose. Those clearcuts will be highly visible from state scenic Highway 88."

Years ago, conservancy representatives visited the University of California's Blodgett Experimental Forest outside Georgetown, where they study forests and logging. The director at the time was Bob Heald, a member of the state Board of Forestry. Asked what happened to wildlife after a clearcut, Evatt remembered Heald saying, "They die." Heald went on to explain how the displaced animals move into already occupied habitat and the food supply can't support them.

"We think that may be playing out in a tragic way locally," Evatt said. "We just learned that two more bears drowned in the PG&E flume in the North Fork Mokelumne River canyon last December. Biologists aren't sure why, but they think bear migration patterns in the canyon have changed. Mother bears who don't know the flume are encountering it for the first time and don't teach their cubs not to climb in. All 15 of the bears that died in the flume were cubs or yearlings."

ForestEthics, an international nonprofit that works to protect endangered forests around the world, has secured major environmental commitments from companies like Home Depot, Staples and Limited Brands. ForestEthics and local residents are educating SPI's customer base about its logging practices in order to bring the message to SPI's doorstep.

Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch is a community-based organization in Arnold. Along with its local and statewide supporters, it has been trying since 2000 to change SPI's logging practices.

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