

Union Democrat, August 27, 2002

## **Science, not accusations will protect forests**

Supervisors Paul Stein, Calaveras County, Dick Pland, Tuolumne County, and Ray Simon Stanislaus County, charged that environmentalists were responsible for Sequoia's McNally Fire, citing only to the accusations of an unnamed Forest Service official ["Forest management," letters, Aug. 13].

The supervisors allege that environmentalists are waging war with lawsuits and appeals against reasonable efforts to thin forests of underbrush and excessive fuels, yet offer no studies or reports to back up their inflammatory accusations. The supervisors fail to provide factual support because environmentalists have not appealed or brought lawsuits against reasonable efforts to thin forests and reduce underbrush.

The supervisors' claims, and others like them, have been directly contested by the General Accounting Office, the non-partisan research wing of Congress, which found that only 20 out of 1,640 fire-hazard reduction projects in the country planned over the last two years had been appealed, and none had been taken to court.

The supervisors' argument is just a rehash of allegations made to Congress by the U.S. Forest Service, which were recently proven baseless. When Reps Jay Inslee, DWashington, and Mark Udall, DColorado, asked to see the Forest Service list of fuel reduction projects supposedly appealed or litigated by environmentalists, the Forest Service was forced to admit that no such list existed ' According to the July 25 letter from Inslee and Udall to Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth, "We now have been informed that the promised list of the specific projects that supposedly were the basis for the report does not exist - and never existed."

Contrary to the supervisors' allegations, environmentalists frequently advocate forest management that would thin forests of underbrush and remove very small diameter trees that constitute excessive fuels. In forests where fire is a natural and vital component, environmentalists have also advocated prescriptive fires. We have especially promoted these fuel reduction projects around homes and structures.

Unfortunately, the Forest Service rarely proposes these types of projects. Instead, so-called thinning and fuel reduction projects as proposed by the Forest Service usually means logging deep in the forest.

Thinning by logging larger trees actually contributes to the fire problem. Logging removes tree trunks, the least flammable of forest fuels, and dries the forest by removing canopy and opening the forest to sunlight and wind. Shrubs grow where trees once stood, creating more fuel. To top off the recipe for disaster, after heavy logging, the Forest Service often creates tree plantations that add to fire risk by creating thickets of small, flammable trees

The major reason for the dry forest conditions and the fires we are experiencing is not environmentalists or environmental laws, but more likely drought. Although management decisions, such as leaving forest canopies intact to keep forests cool and moist or removing excessive underbrush, can reduce the number or severity of fires, they can never prevent fires. We should therefore focus the majority of our fire-fighting dollars on preventive activities in the area around homes and structures, including spending money to make homes as fire-proof as possible.

The plain and simple truth is that environmentalists have not obstructed legitimate fire hazard reduction projects. What we have opposed, and continue to oppose, is logging under the guise of fuel reduction that actually exacerbates fire hazards while destroying vital habitat.

It is extremely unfortunate that our civic leaders are using the fires in our national forests to take potshots at certain citizens and, worse yet, that they are attempting to dismantle the very laws that protect our national forests and that give the public the right to participate in decisions affecting our resources.

Environmentalists are not waging war against anybody. We challenge our representatives to get down to the hard work of examining the facts and the science behind forest fires so that we can start taking constructive steps to protect our communities.

### **Ara Marderosian**

Ara Marderosian is executive director of Sequoia ForestKeepers in Kernville. His e-mail address is [ara@sequoiforestkeeper.org](mailto:ara@sequoiforestkeeper.org).