

## OPINION

# Forest Watch questions clear-cut harvesting plan

A proposed Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI) timber harvest plan identifies more than 250 acres for new clear-cutting in the Forest Creek watershed above West Point.

Most anyone who knows is unhappy about the plan, which opponents say will result in increased deforestation, habitat obliteration, unnatural erosion and excessive silt in the delicate Upper Mokelumne River Watershed, which supplies drinking water to millions of northern Californians.

"The evidence of increasing deforestation is still so shocking to me, even though I deal with this issue every day," said Addie Jacobson, a board member of Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch, a Calaveras County forest and watershed coalition founded in 2000.

"If this isn't deforestation, I'm not sure what would classify as such," said Jacobson.

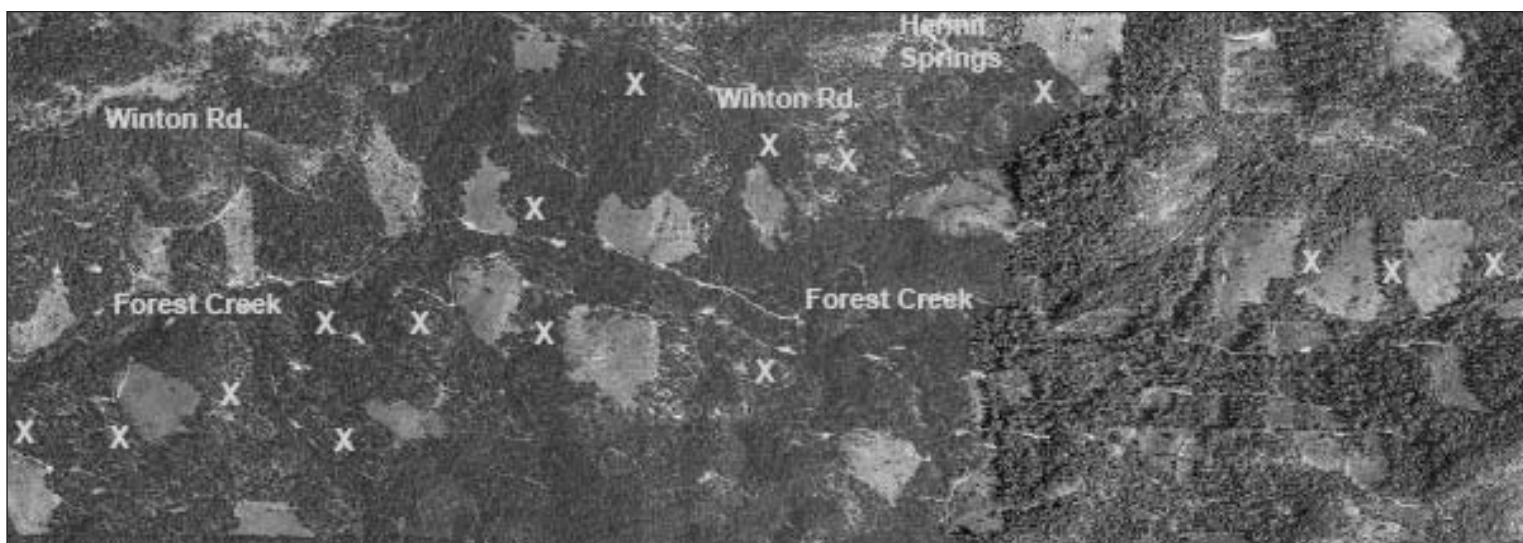
"The Forest Creek proposal is the latest in a recent string of (timber harvest plans) in the Mokelumne River watershed.

This one would accomplish an objective of SPI's business plan that is showing up other places around here — that of clear-cutting patches adjacent to other recent clear cuts."

As the largest private landowner in Calaveras County, SPI now owns nearly 73,000 acres in the county, or approximately one-third of Calaveras' entire forested land above the 3,000-foot elevation.

### Historical forest management

The influx of the gold miners in the mid-19th century brought with it the beginnings of serious log-



"X" marks the spots of proposed new clear cuts adjacent to existing clear cuts on the Forest Creek Watershed.

ging in the Sierra Nevada. From that time until the present, logging has been part of the region.

The methods of timber harvest varied, but the majority of the forests cut in recent memory were through selective harvest, through which only a portion of the standing trees in a harvest area is cut.

Sometimes, companies and individuals "high-graded" the timberland, taking the biggest and best trees and leaving the rest, according to the forest watch group.

At other times, decisions were made for the forest's long-term health and productive capacity.

But Forest Watch members say they do not remember when a majority of the harvesting done broadly across the local landscape removed all of the forest in order to produce lumber.

### Recent changes in timber harvest

The traditional methods of logging changed dramatically and quickly in Calaveras County as well as the entire Sierra Nevada range when one company, Redding-

based Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI), bought large tracts of private forest land and then embarked on a business plan using the intensive and controversial method of clear-cutting and similar alternatives for a majority of their harvest, according to Forest Watch.

SPI now owns over 1.7 million acres in the Sierra Nevada and has obtained permits since 1996 to clear cut or nearly clear cut well over 250,000 acres, a quarter of the total the company said in 2000 would be cut over a hundred-year period.

Such clear-cuts in Calaveras and other Sierra counties are now visible on satellite photos and from commercial airliners.

In order to continue to raise issues about how forests are maintained, concerned citizens who did not oppose logging in general, but just the proposed massive scale clear-cutting, formed Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch, which remains the area's main local advocacy center for responsible timber harvest.

According to Forest Watch, so far in 2008, SPI has submitted plans propos-

ing cutting of 1,159 total local acres, 966 of which (83 percent) are through clear-cutting and near clear-cutting.

While forests continue to be a source for timber production, Forest Watch says increasingly healthy and diverse forests are being valued for their many other values, such as water storage and filtration, wildlife preservation, recreation, and significantly, for mitigation of climate change effects.

Worldwide, from public pressure and new scientific understanding, a major shift is happening.

More timber companies are beginning to practice more sustainable logging.

Simultaneously, more consumers and builders are demanding Forest Stewardship Council certification rather than lumber branded by the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, the industry certification that allows massive clear-cutting.

California's forested areas are the source for 80 percent of the state's water supply.

The Sierra Nevada alone is responsible for 60-65 percent of this water.

A crucial societal impor-

tance of this is summed up by forest ecologist, Chris Maser:

"I would submit that in the long run, in the future, wood fiber is not going to be the most important product from our forests. It is going to be water. Humanity may survive without wood fiber; nothing survives without water."

According to Forest Watch, any land use activity that threatens the vital water resource can have deleterious impacts statewide.

Clear-cutting is one such land use where major water effects are increased erosion leading to sedimentation, nutrient loading and decreased storage capacity.

It also causes water yield changes such as increased high flows from storms and spring run-off, as well as decreased low flows in summer, which negatively affects riparian and aquatic habitats.

Opponents contend that clear-cutting poses the risk of increased watercourse siltation and soil erosion, which increases the need for costly water treatment and can diminish the capacity of

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## Fragile forest roads closed for the winter

Dirt roads and trails on the Eldorado National Forest will be closed from Jan. 1 through March 31. This is the first year the seasonal closure of dirt roads and trails will go into effect, said Eldorado National Forest Supervisor Ramiro Villalvazo.

"This may be news to some people. However, it shouldn't come as a surprise to the thousands of people who participated in the travel management decision making process

that occurred over the past three years."

The closure affects only dirt roads and trails. More than 600 miles of paved and graveled roads and trails will generally continue to be open during this time period.

"The seasonal closure occurs during the months that have historically been the wettest of the year," said Villalvazo.

"Our intention is to reduce environmental damage caused by rutting

and erosion, to reduce damage to drainage structures, such as rolling dips; and to help protect water quality."

Villalvazo said that the seasonal closure can be extended if wet weather conditions warrant.

The roads and trails in the Rock Creek Area of the Eldorado National Forest near Georgetown will not be included in the general forest closure plan. This area has its own wet weather closure procedures

which have been in place since 1999.

Information about closures in the Rock Creek Area is available on the Eldorado National Forest website: [www.fs.fed.us/r5/eldorado](http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/eldorado).

A free motor vehicle use map that identifies the roads and trails designated for motorized use will be available in early 2009.

The map will be available at all Eldorado National Forest offices and will eventually be downloadable from the forest's website.

## Forest practices will have consequences, for good or ill

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the state's water storage facilities.

The need to remove accumulated silt from water reservoirs risks disturbing toxic residues, like mercury left over from the mining era.

All of this increases costs and risks to ratepayers who ultimately bear the burden of unchecked erosion, according to the Forest Watch.

Other concerns are chemical herbicides that are used in the clear-cutting process.

According to Forest Watch, there are some legitimate reasons to use clear-cutting as "a tool in the forester's toolbox."

Sometimes there are insect- or disease-infested trees that need to be removed.

At other times, in order to open up the forest for shade-intolerant timber species, clear-cutting may be used in part of the harvest area.

However, according to Forest Watch, clear-cutting used as 'the major tool in the toolbox' in a wholesale manner across the landscape is essentially a business decision.

It is the least expensive and least labor-intensive logging method and can be used to maximize short-term profit.

A Planning and Conservation League report cites John Le Blanc of the University of California at Davis Extension Service, who states that clear-cutting is also easier to administer than selection logging because it does not involve choosing, marking, or cutting individual trees.

For these reasons, clear-cutting reduces the number of workers needed to remove a particular amount of timber.

This efficiency benefits only the owner, not workers or the local economy.

In addition to understory and habitat decimation, many believe clear-cutting creates increased fire danger.

According to Forest Watch, whereas in other forest types where not all trees are destroyed, even in catastrophic wildfires, plantations tend to burn up completely in all levels of fire severity.

Their lower branches serve as ladders for fire to climb, and their consistent heights allow the fire to run from crown to crown, resulting in one of the most destructive and frightening types of wildfire.

Also, forests are continually being looked at as valuable resources for carbon sequestration, since they can serve as either a carbon sink or carbon source.

### Thoughtful and appropriate forest management into the future will determine whether Sierra forests reach their highest potential to contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions or, conversely, serve more to increase the problem.

Depending on how they are managed, forests can either contribute to the solution or to the problem of growing greenhouse gas emissions.

California forests are in a worrisome position in this regard.

As reported in 2003 by Pacific Forest Trust President Laurie Wayburn, "According to the California Energy Commission, California lost 30 percent of its sequestration capacity in the last decade alone."

Thoughtful and appropriate forest management into the future will determine whether Sierra forests reach their highest potential to contribute to reducing

greenhouse gas emissions or, conversely, serve more to increase the problem.

Three main impacts from climate change are widely accepted to already be under way in California's forests.

They are decreased Sierra snow pack with attendant earlier runoff; more frequent and more devastating wildfires; and increased infestation by insects and disease.

California's forested areas have been a treasure trove of biodiversity. According to the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, the Sierra region alone supports half of all plant species found in California; provides habitats for 66 percent of the bird and mammal species and about 50 percent of the reptile and amphibian species in California; and is home to more than 400 species of terrestrial vertebrates and in excess of 320 species of aquatic invertebrates.

As simplified tree plantations replace diverse natural forests, much of this diversity is damaged or destroyed.

The buffer areas along waterways, left after clear cuts, are inadequate to satisfy the Forest Practice Rules requirement "to maintain functional wildlife habitat in sufficient condition for continued use by the existing wildlife community within the planning watershed."

California's wildlife and

native vegetation are threatened by clear-cutting. Wildlife movement is increasingly fragmented and constrained by the Sierra-wide patchwork of clear cut units across watersheds. Habitat and food sources for animals that require a mature forest environment are destroyed. California's oak woodlands, too, are decimated by clear-cutting.

Oaks are an extremely important wildlife resource and also sequester large quantities of carbon. Amphibians, highly susceptible to hormone disruption when exposed to minute quantities of herbicides, are declining rapidly in California's forested areas where clear-cutting and its accompanying herbicide applications are occurring.

Forest Watch encourages local residents to take active roles in promoting healthy forest management.

Citizens can enact county rules for forestry, take a more active role in the Timber Harvest Plan review process, and advocate for rule and policy changes and legislation.

Citizens can also work to ensure the updated General Plan addresses the impact of forest activities.

For more information call Forest Watch at 795-8260, email to [info@epfw.org](mailto:info@epfw.org), or visit [www.epfw.org](http://www.epfw.org).