

Forest Watchers Update Clearcut Data

by John Hall

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The Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch barely registers on the radar of logging giant Sierra Pacific Industries, if at all, but the group is hoping a new program will help make its presence felt.

Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch was created in 2000 "to protect, promote, and restore healthy forests and watersheds to maintain the quality of life in the Sierra Nevada."

"SPI filed timber harvest plans for 51 units, 49 of them clear cuts," Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch president Bruce Castle said. "We've been working on this, educating people, ever since. To date, we have not slowed down clear cutting in the Sierra. SPI doesn't pay a lot of attention to us at this time, and will continue not to until we pose some kind of threat."

That threat may come in the form of a new program, the Community Action Project, through which Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch will help citizens shape or change the rules that affect the lives of Calaveras County inhabitants, and actively support other groups whose issues are in line with its philosophy.

"It will be an outreach program to several areas of the county's development," Castle said. "Calaveras County had 40,000 people in the 2000 census. Unless something changes, I would expect that in 2025 there will be 125,000 or more. The challenge is for the citizens to slow it down."

The organization also may collaborate with the Sierra Club, combining experience and knowledge of clear cutting and numbers of members in a "Stop Clear Cutting California" campaign.

Last week, Castle and Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch board member Barry Boulton took a flight in a four-seat Cessna 210 from Calaveras County's Maury Rasmussen Field to update the organization's aerial photographic data of timber harvesting in Calaveras County watersheds.

The airplane's owner and pilot, Saul Chaikin, is a volunteer with LightHawk, a Lander, Wyo., based environmental aviation organization. LightHawk arranges flights with its volunteer pilots and their airplanes for partner organizations, the media, decision-makers, community members and researchers.

"We've been able to tap into them for the past three or four years," Castle said.

While Castle provided direction and commentary, Boulton shot image after image of the

scenery below.

"We took Mike Chrisman, California Secretary for Resources, up in August," Castle said. "We also took Paul Stein, now chief deputy director of Fish and Game, for a flight. We couldn't get him to go when he was county supervisor for District 2."

One area of interest was land surrounding the South Grove of Calaveras Big Trees State Park.

"Sierra Pacific Industries owns land on three sides of the South Grove, Castle said. "Clear-cutting as SPI's preferred method of timber harvesting is very distressing to people living around the South Grove."

Other areas of particular interest were in the drainages of the South Fork of the Mokelumne River, Forest Creek and North Fork of the Mokelumne River.

"Seven timber harvest plans were filed on the South Fork of the Mokelumne in 2002," Castle said.

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