Healthy Forests Are a Long Way Off

By

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With millions of dead trees surrounding the San Bernardino mountain community of Big Bear, the future of this resort hangs perilously on the edge between bureaucratic action, and the whims of nature; that, unlike last season, a fire will not ignite the tinder- dry forest and create a disaster.

Without urgent attention the national forests all over the West will continue to burn out of control as they have as recently as 2003, when the town of Big Bear had to be evacuated. Fearful residents hope that this won't happen again, but prescriptions for how to fix the forests are colliding.

"We have two huge problems here," says Ruth Wenstrom, public affairs officer for the San Bernardino National Forest. "The first is millions of dead trees. The second is hundreds of thousands of acres which need to be thinned so that they don't also become dead trees."

Forest Service scientists say these conditions are due to a pine bark beetle infestation in the forest and the choked undergrowth that left unchecked can and has led to a catastrophic crown fire, one that burns all the way to the tops of the largest trees and one that can take the town with it. Last year this same dark scenario came to fruition at Summerhaven, Ariz., in the Santa Catalina Mountains above Tucson.

Money to thin the forest, what there was of it, was spent far from the now burned community, post fire analysis has shown.

These conditions exist in all of the national forests in the West; the result of years of over-harvesting of old-growth timber, 75-plus years of fire suppression; the rapid growth of small shrubbery and thick young stands of second-growth trees known as "ladder fuels" by forest scientists, replacing the harvested fire-resistant oldest stands.

The reason is more economic that ecological, but now changes have to be made to reverse this trend and time is short.

"Our priorities are as follows," Wenstom says: "Removal of dead trees along evacuation routes, so that we can ensure that we'll be able to get folks out safely if there is another fire. Clearing around radio communication sites, to ensure that they are not burned and continue to operate if we need them during a fire, and building community protection zones (fuel breaks) around communities.

We're in pretty good shape on the first two items," she says, "although it's a continuing effort as additional trees continue to die."

Forest Service officials in San Bernardino contend that these overgrown and degraded ecological conditions locally are the result of a six-year drought that weakened the trees and left them susceptible to insect infestation, root disease and parasitic vulnerability to species such as mistletoe.

In the 1800s and before, fire occurred naturally, and cleaned the forest floor of debris, small growth under story and left breathing room for canopy species to thrive. That ended in the 20th century when escalated harvesting and total fire suppression altered the landscape and more small trees survived than should have.

Bark beetles are present in the ecosystem naturally and only flourish when trees degrade to these critical levels. When this much new habitat opens up, Forest Service entomologists say, beetles take advantage of it.

The U.S. Forest Service is responsible for these findings, even though its management policies: over-harvesting timber, and put-out-all-fires, created the disaster they are faced with solving.

Timber companies and some political decision makers, however, claim the burdensome environmental review process for any treatment action stalls critical projects that could reduce the chances of catastrophic wildfire. The Healthy Forests Initiative and Healthy Forests Restoration Act passed by the Republican House in 2001 seeks to correct this by allowing an expedited review process and further exceptions for critical areas adjacent to communities such as Big Bear.

As stated in the act, “For areas within the wildland-urban interface, but farther than 11/2 miles from the boundary of an at-risk community, the Forest Service, Dept. of Interior, and Bureau of Land Management are not required to analyze more than the proposed agency action and one additional action alternative. Agencies are expected to analyze the effects of failing to take action.”

But this expedited process has a downside and it comes in the form of wildlife habitat considerations that as a rule take a long time to complete. A Sept. 29th temporary decision allows forest supervisors to determine specific species requirements in a local arbitrary way circumventing environmental regulations in the Endangered Species Act.

This leaves the door open to political shenanigans stemming from local business interests and for the forest supervisor deciding that the best available science is none at all, say groups like the Center For Biological Diversity in Tucson, Ariz., who criticize the plan.

“I am frustrated but not surprised that the Forest Service has cut 150,000 old growth trees in the Big Bear area,” says Monica Bond, biologist for the Center's Idyllwild, Calif. office. “I believe that the Forest Service has been removing more large trees than are necessary, but because these are fuelbreaks near towns, the Center for Biological

Diversity has not opposed the treatments. This will change if we find that large trees are being targeted for removal in the backcountry."

In the current climate, environmental groups are accused of using "Junk Science" by supporters of continued old growth logging. For some, including members of Congress, this can mean any study that finds evidence they, and their interest groups don't like, is often cited by environmental groups who oppose the Healthy Forests Initiative.

The Healthy Forests Initiative allows clearcuts of 1,000 acres when disease or insect damage is present.

"Generally speaking, I don't see much purpose in removing old growth, unless it's a gregarious species like lodgepole [pine] that normally burns in a crown fire, and then one can be selective - all you want is enough to force the fire to ground," says Prof. Stephen Pyne, Historian of fire at Arizona State University.

"Thinning efforts should focus," Center For Biological Diversity says, "entirely on the small trees that make up the vast majority of the fire risk in the forest. Approximately 90 percent of the trees in the Southwest are smaller than 12 inches in diameter. Large and old trees are relatively fire-resistant, and are extremely rare after 100 years of logging in the forests."

For these reasons, they say, it is important to protect and preserve the large trees that are largely deficient in the forest, and remove much of the small trees that are found in high densities.

At the same time," the center concludes, "it is critical to remove the factors that have lead to the degradation of the forest ecosystems, such as logging large trees, livestock grazing, and fire suppression. It is impossible to protect and restore our forests unless we stop the activities that continue to degrade them."

The new rule just added in Healthy Forests preempts the 1982 Reagan rule, which is more stringent, and well defined about wildlife considerations in land management projects.

"The new 'interpretive' rule states that 'The 1982 rule is not in effect,' says Andy Stahl, executive director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics. "The 1982 rule includes the requirement that forest plans protect viable populations of native vertebrate species."

"Another frustration," Bond says, "is that so many trees are being removed via Categorical Exclusions without adequate environmental review, particularly regarding cumulative impacts."

In the Healthy Forests Act, categorical exclusions are for those categories of activities that normally do not require either an environmental impact statement or an

environmental assessment. This will facilitate, it says, “efficient planning and timely decisions concerning the removal of hazardous fuels and stabilization and rehabilitation of areas so as to reduce risks to communities and the environment caused by severe wildfires.”

They are:

- Hazardous fuels reduction activities including prescribed fire and mechanical methods such as crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, and mowing.
- Activities (such as reseeding or planting, fence construction, culvert repair, installation of erosion control devices, and repair of roads and trails) necessary for the rehabilitation of habitat, watersheds, historical, archeological, and cultural sites and infrastructure impacted by wildfire and/or wildfire suppression.

Clearcuts of 250 acres or less are allowed in these exemptions, and in some cases can include ‘green’ old growth trees declared dead prematurely.

“The Sierra Club in California is suing over a few Categorically Excluded projects in the Tahoe and Eldorado National Forests,” Bond says.

A bill sponsored by Rep. Scott McInnis R-CO in April of 2003 that is the basis for the healthy forests policy in effect now, to address the problem of insect-damage, and clear-cuts of 1,000 acres were included as part of the recommendations.

McInnis cites lawsuits by environmental groups as the main reason that fuel projects aren’t implemented, but Forest Service records show that only two percent of the projects draw lawsuits and those are in the backcountry far from the threatened towns.
“Under the guise of fighting insects, this bill will devastate our forests by allowing 1,000-acre clearcuts without any public oversight or accountability, Stahl says. "Insects are a natural part of the forest, -- clearcuts and pesticides are not.”

The Healthy Forests Act allows for the taking of old growth as part of the plan that has a small percentage of its crown “dead.” This has the potential for overestimation due to the marketability of trees 24 inches and up size range. It makes it possible to attract private contracts to thin the forest, the bulk of which is not timber of marketable quality and size.

All of these techniques are conflated in the current Healthy Forests Initiative.

On the San Bernardino who is in charge of the groundwork?

“That job of coordinating the groundwork has just been filled,” Tricia Abbas media contact for the Mountain Top Ranger District in Fawnskin, Calif. says. “The Supervisor’s Office coordinates that aspect more so than we do up here.”

The agency says Ben Del Villar is responsible for the program, but he didn't respond for this article.

In the Mountain Top District's official statement, released in September 2004 the projects are moving forward rapidly. According to District Ranger Allison Stewart they've treated 42,000 acres to date.

On these acres, 168,000 trees greater than 24 inches in diameter at breast height were removed, and 504,000 trees that are less than eight inches. Opponents say that's a lot of old growth and a classic example of what they say is wrong with the Bush Healthy Forests plan.

Were these large trees all dead? Was this a selective-cutting effort, frequently conducted with helicopter logging? Or was it a composition of a clearcut randomly? As a rule, forest scientists say trees of this diameter and age resist fires.

"We haven't done any thinning of large diameter green old growth trees," Stewart says. "The trees that we have cut and removed that are 24 inches or greater were dead, in the urban interface and an immediate threat to life and property. Trees that are that large, dead, and in the general forest area have been retained for wildlife."

Wildlife biologists call these completely dead wildlife trees "snags."

The rules of what is considered "dead" are open to interpretation in the Healthy Forests Initiative.

"From what I've seen in the San Jacinto Mountains," Bond says, "the Forest Service cuts trees that are actively dying, not just those that are already 100 percent dead. However, I understand from entomologists that these beetle-killed trees are almost certainly going to die if they are actively fading from the top down (they go pretty fast)."

Bond says she hadn't done field checks in Big Bear but planned on field checking sites in the San Bernardino Mountains soon.

"We aren't doing clearcuts," Stewart says. "We are doing thinning projects. We have used the categorical exclusion language in the Healthy Forests Act."

The man in charge of policy in the Bush administration for the USDA is Mark Rey, under secretary for natural resources and environment, a former lobbyist while vice president for forest resources with the American Forest and Paper Association, headquartered in Washington, DC from 1992 to 94. Rey served as executive director of the American Forest Resource Alliance in Washington, DC from 1989 to 1992. From 1984 to 1989, he was vice president for public forestry programs with the National Forest Products Association.

Rey has been a longtime advocate of harvesting profitable old growth trees on the national forests including the practice of clear-cutting which removes all trees in any given area designated for harvesting, and this includes that practice as a key part of the Healthy Forests plan.

Environmental groups and conservation scientists say this is akin to the fox guarding the henhouse.

“Rey also co-wrote the notorious ‘salvage rider,’ which suspended environmental laws that controlled the clear-cutting of old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest,” notes Robert S. Devine in a recent book “Bush Versus the Environment.”

Critics of the Healthy Forests Initiative say the title of the policy is oxymoronic, because the plan, allows the removal of old growth trees, which they say is the cause of the current fire-prone situation in the first place. When a forest under story is restored by thinning, or fire, fire-resistant old growth trees remain allowing natural replacement to occur, and fire experts say it was this forest-floor cleaning role that fire has played throughout evolutionary history.

The fire policy for 75 years however, has been to extinguish all fires and that has been where the bulk of the funding for the agencies has gone historically.

In the President’s Management Agenda in Healthy Forests, the Forest Service will treat an estimated 1.6 million acres of hazardous fuel to protect communities and reduce flammability of forests, woodlands, shrublands, and grasslands.

Approximately 890,000 of those acres will be in wildland-urban interface areas and approximately 720,000 acres will be treated in the non-wildland-urban interface. Treatment areas will include wildland-urban (near towns) interface areas where national forest lands are intermingled with other federal, state, private, or tribal lands, short-interval fire-dependent ecosystems, areas within or adjacent to wilderness, and areas where treatment could reduce long-range fire suppression costs.

In her written comments to the Mountain Top Ranger District concerning two new fuels projects at South Big Bear and Miller Canyon, Bond writes, “We ask for the Forest Service to provide scientific justification for a number of claims made in the ‘purpose and need’ sections."

"We are concerned about the lack of any requirement to retain large diameter trees on 3,071 acres of the South Big Bear site and on more than 3,015 of the Miller Canyon site. In some instances, these sites are over ½ mile from any private property boundary.”

During 2002, the wildlife management program spent $464,397 and employed 7.2 full-time employees on projects, with the need for an additional $847,000 to support forest health, and inventory and monitor threatened & endangered species as stated in the San Bernardino National Forest Business Management Plan.

Only 75 percent of the projects meet all of the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act and the forest calls for more help in this regard as to personnel.

The whole resource management section constitutes only 5 percent of the total budget for the forest. Seventy-percent, $27, 591,824, is allocated for fire and aviation management that consists of wildfire prevention through education, hazardous fuels reduction, and proactive preparation.

It also includes on-forest, national and international wildfire and emergency incident response. There is an additional emergency fund through the National Fire and Disaster support for $16 million.

"The cost of doing the work involves both the planning costs and the actual cost of removing the material," Wenstrom says. "There has also been a lot of work on community protection zones, but there is still a lot more to do. Our work in the community protection zones includes both dead tree removal and thinning of trees."

Wenstrom says the job of thinning forests further away from communities is much further away. "We haven't really even begun that because we're still working on community protection."

Are these projects just another example of dusting wildlife issues aside for timber harvesting? "Possibly," Forester Andy Stahl says.

"To the extent thinning projects threaten species viability, then the new rule may allow more such projects to go forward," Stahl says. "However, I'm skeptical that there are many instances where bona fide fuels reduction thinning projects actually threaten wildlife viability."

"During the planning phase, we will evaluate what needs to be removed," Wenstrom says, "the best way to remove it, special circumstances that need to be considered while we're doing the work (things like endangered species, archeology sites, etc. that we want to protect), and the options available to protect them. It critical to do both so that the end product is well thought out and helps us to end up with a forest we can all be proud of."

The on-the-ground treatments to restore the national forests are underway, but everyone agrees we are only at the beginning.

"The progress is not fast," Stahl says. "But the Forest Service is becoming notorious for not doing anything fast."

Will it take place fast enough to prevent the next fire from becoming catastrophic? That's the question the residents of mountain towns like Big Bear want answered as fast as possible.

In the business plan's own words, "The San Bernardino National Forest's journey to becoming a healthy public forest still has a long way to go."