

Replant after wildfire or let nature take over?

Scott Smith
Associated Press

GROVELAND, Calif. (AP) — Nearly a year since a historic wildfire charred a huge swath of California's High Sierra, debate rages over what to do with millions of dead trees left in its wake: truck them to lumber mills or let nature to take its course?

One side argues that the blackened dead trees and new growth beneath them already sprouting to life create vital habitat for dwindling birds such as spotted owls and black-backed woodpeckers. Others say time is running out on a golden opportunity to salvage timber to pay for replanting and restoring the forest.

It's a classic standoff between environmentalists and supporters of the timber industry, which contends dead trees and brush pose a new fire hazard.

The U.S. Forest Service is expected to unveil its final decision in the coming weeks on how much of the land burned by the wildfire, known as the Rim Fire, can be logged.

"It's not always possible to please everybody," said Robert Bonnie, the U.S. Department of Food and Agriculture's Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment. He oversees the Forest Service.

Bonnie declined to say how many trees the Forest Service

will allow loggers to haul away in the plan being drafted, but he said the goal is to balance the forest's health with the needs of the local community. "We try and do our best with the science we have," he said.

The blaze ignited on Aug. 17, 2013, when a hunter lost control of his campfire. For two months, flames raced across 400 square miles of the Stanislaus National Forest, Yosemite National Park's backcountry and private timber land. It ranks as California's third-largest wildfire and the largest in the Sierra Nevada's recorded history.

Loggers have already begun removing a small portion of dead trees along roads so motorists aren't hurt by falling timber. A much more aggressive logging project is under consideration, targeting nearly 50 square miles of forest land.

Environmentalists said they are alarmed by the prospect of logging.

"For us, post-fire logging is the last and worst thing you should ever do in a forest," said Chad Hanson, a forest ecologist and founder of the John Muir Project, an environmentalist group. "The scientific community is so strongly against this."

Intense fires create snag forests that are three times as rare as living, old-growth forests, he said. Wood-boring beetles lay eggs in the dead trees, spawning larvae that become food for the woodpeckers. Flowering plants and shrubs sprouting on the forest floor attract small, flying insects for bats and other animals that the spotted owl swoops in to eat, Hanson said.

Bird species have come back strongly in the burned areas that could be logged, Hanson said. In a recent visit, he pointed to conifer seedlings two to three inches tall sprouting up as a result of the fire. He worries that heavy logging tractors dragging out dead trees will destroy the seedlings.

Hanson questioned the Forest Service's motives for proposing logging. "When they call it a recovery effort,

they're talking a recovery of revenue, not a recovery of the forest," he said.

The national forests are not wildlife preserves, countered Steve Brink of the California Forestry Association, who represents the timber industry. National forests are set aside for many uses, including timber production, he said.

Selling the trees will pay for restoring the forest, creating jobs in a region of California where logging once flourished, Brink said. Removing the burned trees will allow for the forests to be reopened more quickly for public use, he said, noting that the natural regeneration could take a century or two and, in the meantime, shrub brush would dominate.

The dead trees will fall across each other on top of the shrubs, creating prime fire conditions, said Brink, taking a position that environmentalists say has no scientific foundation.

The dead trees can be logged for about two years after a fire and then they disintegrate, losing value as timber, Brink said. He fears that environmentalists will file lawsuits to run out the clock if the Forest Service's decision doesn't suit them, he said.

In July, wildlife advocates sued the Forest Service, arguing that officials have failed to protect spotted owls and black-backed woodpeckers from logging of burned trees in other parts of the Sierra.

"They know if they can stall the process, the brush wins, deterioration will take over — and they win," Brink said.

Parts of Yosemite National Park backcountry that burned in the Rim Fire reopened in April with a warning that visitors should be careful of falling trees. The trees that fell across roads were removed, but logging is not allowed in the park, Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman said.

Craig Pedro, the administrator of Tuolumne County, said he is worried about logging trucks flooding the roads and causing traffic hazards. But community leaders are united behind anything that brings the forest back to life sooner rather than later, Pedro said.

The local economy depends on people coming to fish in the streams, hunt deer and pick mushrooms, he said, adding that much of the forest is still closed with no end in sight.

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