

Managing the forests of California is a seriously debated issue. People on both sides of the issue claim to have the science on their side to represent their viewpoints. Almost every citizen of this state has an opinion of what constitutes a “healthy forest.” Unfortunately, regardless of whatever rhetoric you subscribe to the facts are the same, fire intensity is increasing, acres burned is increasing, and the demand for forest products is also increasing. In deciding these issues, one thing is certain, forest products require about a third of the energy to produce the same amount of steel and it is a renewable resource. Here are the facts, you decide.

Forests in California, especially those that lie on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada, evolved with fire. Historically, a fire on the interval of every 20-30 years swept through the forest floor, clearing the understory brush and competing vegetation and creating openings in the forest. It is of no coincidence that the life spans of many of the chaparral species that are native to this state are on the order of 30 years. Low intensity fires created perfect conditions for the germination of ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosae*), the conifer species that was most prevalent in the state. Fires played a role of thinning out the diseased and less vigorous trees, thus keeping insect populations in check. Native Americans traditionally introduced fire as a way to encourage deer and other wildlife forage.

Ponderosa pines require bare mineral soil and full sunlight for their reproduction. This species does not tolerate the shade of its competitors for long periods of time. It tolerates fire well due to its thick bark at maturity and tendency to self-prune, thus preventing catastrophic crown fires, which did occur, but at lower frequencies than we have today.

After the European settlement, fire suppression became the desired method of controlling fire in order to minimize the loss of property. After World War II, due to all of the technological

advances in aircraft and heavy machinery, the ability of Americans to suppress fire was greatly improved. Then with the advent of the Smoky the Bear propaganda, American children were taught the horrible dangers of playing with fire. They were not, however, taught the ecological importance of fire within the ecosystem.

The resultant fire suppressed forest now is over dense with trees and brush. The fuel load has increased to such a point that when a fire does occur in the unnatural conditions, the intensity is greater more often, and the likelihood of the fire making its way into the crowns of trees is increased due to a situation known as a fire ladder. A fire ladder is created when trees of varying heights, possessing “flash fuels” such as their needles, create a pathway to the crowns of the overstory trees. Once a fire has reached the crowns of a stand, mortality is almost always the result. This is evidenced in such situations as the Los Alamo fire in New Mexico or any of the major fires that we’ve had in California.

The demand for forest products in the state of California is exponentially increasing. California, due to its strict forest regulations, and a lack of USFS timber sales, has become a 80% net importer of forest products. This is in lieu of the fact that California is second only to Oregon as being the top timber producing state in the nation. The USFS has reduced their annual harvest by 90% since the mid-eighties.

Most people believe they are doing the “right thing” by opposing timber harvesting in the state of California. However, they fail to recognize the pressure they put on the global environment to meet the demand for timber products. In fact, it’s the “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) mentality that has been increasing the demand on third world countries to meet the US’s demand for wood. The problem with this scenario is that, often third world countries do not have the infrastructure to oversee sustainable harvesting. Worse yet, most of the third world countries are not

nearly as productive at producing forests as the Pacific Northwest is. For example, to get the same amount of timber harvested, it may take 2 acres in a less productive country compared to one acre in the US. Prior to the USFS shutting down its harvesting, the less productive areas were not profitable for harvest.

In 1973, California created the Z'berg-Nejedly Forest Practice Act, which governs the harvesting activities on private and state owned land. It said that harvesting needed to provide for the maximum sustained production of high quality timber products while giving consideration to values relating to recreation, watershed, wildlife, range and forage, fisheries, regional economic vitality, employment, and aesthetic enjoyment. The law also established the necessity for a landowner to acquire the skills of a Registered Professional Forester (RPF) to write a Timber Harvest Plan (THP) in order to harvest wood products for commercial endeavors.

The Forest Practice Act is not the only law that governs California forestry. It is also regulated by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Porter Cologne Water Quality Act, Timberland Productivity Act of 1982, and the California Endangered Species Act. All of these laws are required to comply with federal versions of the law. The THP process substitutes for an Environmental Impact Report under CEQA. These laws were put in place to protect the natural resources of this state.

When a landowner wishes to harvest timber, he/she is required by law to hire a RPF. The only person in the state of California, that can write a plan in order for trees to be cut and sold on private and state lands, is a Registered Professional Forester (RPF). To obtain a RPF license, one must acquire a minimum of seven years of experience, four of which can be substituted with a Bachelors of Science degree in Forestry from an accredited university, plus a minimum of three years of work experience in forestry. Once the seven years is acquired, a written exam must be passed, which

typically has a 25 to 35% pass rate. RPFs are responsible to ensure that their actions are Sustainable, not only for timber production, but also for other resources such as wildlife, water quality, fisheries and the soil. Once a THP is prepared it is submitted to CDF for review. It goes under a round table review process and an on-site review process. In addition, adjacent landowners within 300 feet of the harvest area, and downstream landowners within 1000 feet are notified. Representatives from the Department of Fish and Game, Water Quality, Mines and Geology, and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, and any other agency that may have an interest in the project are all given the plan to review and are invited to the on-site inspection. If all of the issues are addressed to the satisfaction of all of the reviewing agencies, including comments from concerned citizens, then the plan is approved. This process takes months and at times years to complete.

Once an area is harvested, it **MUST** meet certain guidelines for the type of harvesting conducted. If an area is clearcut, for example, it **MUST** be replanted to at least 300 trees per acre. There is **NO** exception to this rule. If a landowner fails to do so, CDF will get involved, plant the area, and if necessary, put a lien on the property for the costs of planting.

I know there are those out there that have a lot of mistrust for timber companies and their management philosophies. Many feel that greed and the bottom line is all that is considered. But ask yourself, to what benefit would they cut their own throats by creating a situation in which the resource they depend on to survive is not harvested in a sustainable manner, thus not renewing itself. Unfortunately, the timber industry is living with there past reputation that was developed with a different land ethic than they hold up to today. When a RPF decides to clearcut a site, the decision is made to invest hundreds and hundreds of dollars, and usually more, an acre to re-establish the forest.

It is easy for us to feel morally justified by protesting the harvesting of forest stands. Most protesters have well-meaning intentions. They feel they are saving the environment. But really, they are only creating more pressure on undeveloped nations and their timber resources. It's the NOT IM MY BACKYARD mentality, that is really, in my opinion, shortsighted. California is a NET IMPORTER of forest products. This state grows more timber than is harvested each and every year! We have the rules in place, the environmental conscience to protect the resources, and the professionals certified to carry out the intent of the laws and do what's right for the forests in this state. If we are truly concerned about the environment on this planet, we will not push our needs on countries with no infrastructure, no environmental conscience, and a lack of professionals to monitor the entire process.

Sincerely,

Danielle Lindler