

California Forests IN DANGER

SPECIAL FOREST ACTION ALERT

California is losing its forests. Government, citizens must act...
to stop annual loss of 30,000 to 40,000 acres of forests and rangeland.

From the southern Sierra to the North Coast, privately owned forests and woodlands in California are being swallowed up for development at a rate of 30,000 to 40,000 acres a year, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. In the process, the state is losing habitat for fish and wildlife, scenic vistas, native plants and open space.

This alarming trend is driven by several causes: population growth; the appreciation in real estate values; and hard times in the lumber industry.

There is not much that Californians can do to change these trends. But there is one threat to our forests that is within our power to change. It is an unintended consequence of the very laws that we've erected to protect forests.

In California, political battles over the impacts of logging have focused on the activities of large industrial timber companies. But not all logging in California is done by large timber companies.

Over 60 percent of California's private forestland is owned and managed by family ranchers and other non-industrial landowners. Most of these landowners practice "light-touch" selective logging.

Motivated by values of conservation and stewardship, they maintain open space and forested landscapes that support fish, wildlife and native plants, as well as scenic vistas that are enjoyed by California residents and tourists.



"When a forest is sold or fragmented, there is loss of habitat, biodiversity, water quality, scenery and other values. It's an alarming and disturbing trend."

~ Louis Blumberg, Director, The Nature Conservancy's California Forest Initiative

As California's Forest Practice Rules have become more complex through legislation and administrative changes, the cost of complying with them has also grown dramatically. These escalating costs create financial pressures that can force smaller operators to log more trees more often, to clearcut and even to sell all or part of their land for development—just to pay for the cost of meeting the regulations that are meant to protect the forests.

Such complaints about excessive regulations—from those being regulated—may seem self-serving, like part of a political lobbying effort to make things easier for a particular industry.

These concerns, however, are being raised by people who want to protect forest lands, not just people who want to cut trees. Maintaining these lands as working forests is important

to California's environment, and it's becoming increasingly clear that the existing regulatory process is making this more difficult. As the *Sacramento Bee* reported on June 7, 2005: "Timber-cutting rules meant to protect forests, rivers and water are at least one factor conspiring to bring [housing] development and its pollution threats from lawn chemicals, fertilizers, septic tanks and oil leaks," into traditionally forested areas.

The Buckeye Forest Project, whose research and recommendations are published here, includes environmentalists, foresters, landowners, water-quality regulators, fish and wildlife biologists, land trust managers, county planners and others who appreciate private forests for their conservation value and their economic value.

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FOREST STEWARDS FACE PAINFUL CHOICES

To understand how the costs of complying with regulations can lead to forests being lost to development, consider the case of the Humboldt County ranch pictured below.

A 160-acre timbered section of the ranch was logged aggressively in the early 1950s, but since then the family owners have only logged twice, lightly and selectively. They want to improve the health and vigor of the forest while creating better wildlife habitat. Their fondest desire is to continue this style of managing their land.

They simply cannot afford to do that under existing regulations.

Because so many surveys and reports are currently required—all prepared by scientists and other contractors at rates of \$50 to \$100 per hour—the family would have to spend \$35,000 to \$45,000 to prepare a Timber Harvesting Plan (THP). Depending on the lumber market conditions at the time, they would probably make less than \$5,000 selling their logs.

On the other hand, if the family was economically forced to violate their conservation ethics and clearcut all available timber, they would likely make \$30,000 profit. Their third option is to sell the property for subdivision, making an estimated \$250,000. This analysis was conducted in 2003, and since then the costs have gone up, and so has the ranch's value as real estate. *(To read this analysis, download <http://buckeyeconservancy.org/pdf/bfpr.pdf>.)*

Such grim equations are driving non-industrial forest landowners throughout California to clearcut and subdivide.



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For three years we met in grange halls, toured private forests, looked at the outcomes of the existing regulatory process and brainstormed ideas and solutions. While we disagreed on some issues, we agreed strongly that non-industrial forest landowners maintain open space and forested landscapes, protect public trust values such as fish and wildlife habitat—and that California's expensive and inefficient regulatory process for logging is having the unintended consequence of discouraging such responsible stewardship.

We *Can* Save California's Private Forests

It will not be easy to change this situation. Regulation of timber harvesting is intensely controversial in California, with the conflict usually focused on the impacts of industrial logging.

The non-industrial forest landowners tend to get lost in the debate—even though there is a growing consciousness that non-industrial forests logged in a light-touch selective manner are a net benefit for California's environment.

Over three years, the Buckeye Forest Project participants discussed dozens of ideas. (For a full list, go to www.BuckeyeConservancy.org/articles.html.) One thing became clear: there is no magic bullet. For example, any reduction in the intensity of regulations for non-industrial forests must be carefully designed lest it be exploited by irresponsible or uninformed landowners.

We have identified some viable approaches to the problem. Two key ideas are shown below—both are under discussion among California legislators. On the last page, there are suggestions for things that citizens and organizations can do to make California's logging regulations work to protect the environment on non-industrial forests.

Make Non-Industrial Timber Management Plans Available for Larger Forests

Created by the legislature in 1990, Non-Industrial Timber Management Plans (NTMPs) allow owners of less than 2,500 acres of timberland to gain long-term approval for logging operations if they commit to uneven-aged management (light-touch selective logging) and other restrictions.

An NTMP requires more upfront scientific analysis than a Timber Harvesting Plan (THP), but because they are valid in perpetuity (with periodic reviews), NTMPs reduce landowners' costs over the long term. And by giving landowners more flexibility in scheduling, they can time their harvests to periods when the market for logs is strongest—and this means they can cut fewer trees to cover their costs and make a reasonable profit.

Many of California's non-industrial forests are larger than 2,500 acres, however. Mostly ranches, these lands provide some of the highest natural-resource and scenic values in the state.

Raising the size limit for NTMPs would support these landowners in being good stewards, protecting habitat, water quality and scenic values—and make it less likely that these important rural lands will be sold and subdivided.

This proposal is not without risk or potential controversy. Some people are concerned there is not enough monitoring currently of NTMPs, and that making them larger would invite new problems. Because of this and other concerns, we recommend that the size limit be expanded to 5,000 or 10,000 acres, with a review of the impacts before further increases are made.

Create a Long-Term Timber Harvesting Plan

Timber Harvesting Plans (THPs) are currently valid for three years, with two one-year extensions possible. Because non-industrial forestland owners must recover the upfront costs of their THPs—typically \$30,000 for studies and documentation—in a three-year period (or five years with additional costs), they are often forced to log more trees more quickly than their preferred stewardship methods would lead them to do.

With the option of conducting their allowed timber harvest over a longer time, non-industrial forestland owners could time their logging to periods when the market for logs is strongest. Such flexibility would allow them to cut fewer trees to cover their costs and make a reasonable profit.

“One of the keys to sustainable forest management is getting more money for the timber you cut,” said Jim Able, a forester and member of the Buckeye Forest Project. “That actually enables the landowner to cut fewer trees, leaving their fastest growing trees in place for the future. A longer-term THP would enable non-industrial landowners to do just that.”



WHY DO THEY HAVE TO CUT ANY TREES?

The cost of complying with California’s logging regulations has grown astronomically in the last 30 years. Today, a typical Timber Harvesting Plan (THP) costs \$30,000 because of all the studies and reports that are required.

Some people may ask “why not just leave the trees alone?” The fact is, that virtually all private forests in California have been logged in the past—they are not ancient “virgin” forests. In the right hands, logging is a tool for good stewardship: without it, young-growth forests can be fire hazards, susceptible to disease and lacking in biodiversity.

Also, many ranchers and other non-industrial forest landowners are “land rich but cash poor.” Their property may be worth a fortune as real estate, but as natural-resource lands, they generate modest revenue. Income from periodic selective logging is important to these landowners’ economic survival. As the state’s logging regulatory process has become more expensive, it has become more difficult for family landowners to generate a reasonable income.

Many of these families have worked the land for generations, and they want to pass it on intact to their heirs. But with rising regulatory costs, selling their property for development becomes a more compelling option. The pressure to sell becomes particularly intense at intergenerational transfer, when estate taxes are levied on a ranch’s market value—not on what it produces in timber and cattle sales.

When a large forested property is developed for housing, this has devastating impacts on watersheds and species’ habitat: more dirt roads eroding into creeks; more streams dried up in summer months by water diversions; more domestic dogs preying on native wildlife; and more pollution from septic systems. Habitat, open space—and the public’s scenic vistas—are diminished forever.



TAKE A STAND FOR FORESTS

Here are things that you can do today to help protect California's private non-industrial forests:

- ◆ Encourage coordination between government agencies to ensure that environmental laws work effectively to foster good stewardship on non-industrial private forests.
- ◆ Recognize and reward the exemplary forest stewards in your county and state.
- ◆ Urge your legislators to support measures that encourage good stewardship on non-industrial private forests (*see page 2.*)
- ◆ Learn about non-industrial forests and the irreplaceable values they provide by visiting a working forest. For info, see <http://cehumboldt.ucdavis.edu/Forestry/>
- ◆ Create more public awareness of non-industrial private forestland and landowners and their role in a healthy ecosystem and economy.
- ◆ Support local conservation groups in their efforts to promote working forests.
- ◆ Support the Buckeye Forest Project in its work to make California's regulatory processes more effective for forest stewardship. For more info, go to www.buckeyeconservancy.org

Because of the costs of complying with California's logging regulatory process, many non-industrial forest owners can no longer practice light-touch selective logging, as shown here. "Until the



An example of light-touch selective logging.

regulatory costs skyrocketed, we typically logged fewer than half of the trees our THPs allowed," said Sally French, a Mattole River rancher and Buckeye Forest Project member. "Now we have to harvest pretty much all that we're allowed to because we have to cover the costs of the THP and earn some kind of income."

ABOUT THE BUCKEYE FOREST PROJECT

More than 70 people have participated since 2003 in this collaborative effort to research and identify problems and seek strategies to preserve open space and foster stewardship of family forestlands. Participants included environmentalists, foresters, landowners, water-quality regulators, fish and wildlife biologists, land trust managers, county planners and others.

The project is sponsored by The Buckeye Conservancy, an association of farm, ranch and forest landowners dedicated to promoting sound resource management and ecological practices on family-owned wildlands of California's North Coast.

Funding has been provided by The Headwaters Fund of Humboldt County, The Buckeye Conservancy, Simpson Fund, California Department of Fish and Game, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, USDA Forest Service and private donors.

For more information, go to: www.buckeyeconservancy.org or call 707.786.9662.

