

Feds investigate logging in forest Environmentalists complain too many trees removed.

By Michael Doyle / Bee Washington Bureau

11/07/07 00:02:18

WASHINGTON -- Agriculture Department investigators are in the Giant Sequoia National Monument this week probing allegations of illegal logging, lawmakers revealed Tuesday. The investigators from the department's Office of Inspector General are examining claims that the Forest Service allowed about 200 protected trees to be chopped down in 2004 and 2005. Environmentalists contend the logging included trees removed near the popular Trail of 100 Giants.

"They're looking to move pretty quickly," said Jeff Lieberman, spokesman for Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-N.Y. "We wanted them to take a look and see what the real deal is." The investigation could reopen old wounds around the Giant Sequoia National Monument, established by President Bill Clinton in 2000 despite some local opposition. Critics contended the 327,769-acre monument, carved into the existing Sequoia National Forest, would unduly cramp important commercial and recreational activities. Monument supporters fear loggers have continued to hold too much power even in areas meant to be preserved. National monuments are supposed to be off limits for timber production, but logging is allowed on national forests.

"It is the responsibility of the Forest Service to protect the trees within the Giant Sequoia National Monument, not to chop them down and sell them to timber companies," Hinchey said in a prepared statement issued Tuesday. In a letter delivered to Capitol Hill by a courier on Monday, Inspector General Phyllis Fong said she expected the investigation field work to be completed by December. A formal report will be issued sometime after that.

Three investigators have been working in the Giant Sequoia National Monument since Oct. 29, according to Sequoia National Forest spokeswoman Mary Chislock. "We are working with an OIG team from the San Francisco office," Chislock said. As is customary, Forest Service and Office of Inspector General officials declined further public comment about the investigation while it is ongoing.

Hinchey is on the House appropriations subcommittee that funds the Forest Service and other public land agencies. Last month, Hinchey joined with fellow Democratic panel members Rep. James Moran of Virginia and John Olver of Massachusetts to request the inspector general review. The Office of Inspector General is the Agriculture Department's law enforcement arm, as well as its internal auditing branch. Its investigators handle both criminal and civil matters, ranging from crop insurance fraud to logging contracts and rural housing grants.

The three lawmakers, in turn, were responding to complaints filed by Sequoia ForestKeeper and **Save America's Forests**. The environmentalists claim that the 200-plus trees allegedly cut around the Trail of 100 Giants far exceeded the number of hazard trees the Forest Service publicly said it needed to remove.

"It's essential that we get to the bottom of what went on," Save America's Forests Director Carl Ross said Tuesday.

Forest Service officials have previously said they had to remove all the dead and dying trees to protect hikers and campers. No giant sequoia trees were cut.

The environmentalists further claimed that 76 of the trees -- commercially valuable sugar pines -- were sent to a nearby Sierra Forest Products timber mill.

Sierra Forest Product officials could not be reached to comment Tuesday, but they previously told staffers for Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, that they welcome any investigation as they did nothing wrong, according to Nunes' legislative director, Damon Nelson. Nunes' district includes the Sequoia National Forest.

The reporter can be reached at mndoyle@mcclatchydc.com or (202) 383-0006.

<http://www.fresnobee.com/263/story/184999.html>