

Fight over a forest's future

Loggers, activists duel over thinning trees in sequoia preserve.

By Tom Knudson -- Bee Staff Writer

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GIANT SEQUOIA NATIONAL MONUMENT -- Ahhh, springtime in the Sierra -- a time of snowmelt creeks, pine-scented breezes and here, in a forest of jaw-dropping, super-sized trees, the rumble of fully loaded logging trucks.

One day last week, as loggers stacked trees in a dusty clearing on one of the last commercial timber sales slated to occur in this 6-year-old monument, Ara Marderosian stood to the side and watched in dismay.

"I hate it," said Marderosian, director of an environmental group called Sequoia ForestKeeper. "They are turning this place into a desert."

From his perch in a big yellow loader that thundered across the clearing, timber company owner Harold Kiper cast a glance at Marderosian, but kept on working. Thinning out dense, fire-prone stands, Kiper said, is good for the land.

"It's a benefit to the forest," said Kiper. "It really is. I'll never be convinced any other way."

Ever since the days of John Muir, logging has touched off conflict in the Sierra. And although there is less timbering today -- the result of layers of environmental restrictions - - loggers still work the woods, increasingly in the name of forest health.

In few places are disagreements over logging sharper than in the Giant Sequoia National Monument east of Fresno. Created by former President Clinton in 2000 and carved out of the Sequoia National Forest, the 327,769-acre preserve is meant to ensure greater protections for the towering, centuries-old sequoia groves that make this region famous.

Clinton's proclamation allowed already approved timber sales to be carried out, a process still under way, and managers also plan to continue some form of thinning in the future to prepare the woods for being safely burned, under controlled circumstances.

But environmentalists have sued the U.S. Forest Service over its management of the Sequoia National Forest. They also are calling for the area to be transferred to Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks, which do not allow commercial logging.

"They say they are improving the forest, but it's just exactly the opposite," said Martin Litton, a Bay Area environmentalist leading the effort. "They have no business being in there. They ruin the land."

At age 89, Litton, a legendary conservationist who has fought to protect rivers and forests around the West since the 1950s, was scheduled to be in the monument Wednesday to meet a film crew working on a documentary of his life, but had to care for his ailing wife instead.

Marderosian filled in, taking the crew into the mountains, snaking past rustic cabins around Hume Lake, looking for loggers. Along a dusty logging road, they found Kiper and his crew, busily trimming and stacking freshly cut pine, cedar and fir trees. Chain saws whined. Wood chips flew. A skidder roared into a clearing, kicking up a cloud of dust.

Neither crew said much to the other. But in side conversations with The Bee, Marderosian and Kiper -- the environmentalist and the logger -- spilled out views that reveal the deep divisions that scar sequoia country and leave aspects of its future uncertain.

Marderosian was not shy about his goal: He wants to see commercial logging in the monument stopped. Such logging, he said, increases fire danger by opening up the forest canopy -- the shady green umbrella of leaves -- to the withering rays of the sun.

"It is causing the forest to become hotter and drier," he said. "It is making the forest more flammable."

Kiper -- wiry and strong at 78 -- made his point in a different way. He hopped in a pickup truck and drove to the Tornado Forest Health Project, a nearby area he logged a few years ago that was burned on purpose this spring to thin vegetation. Plenty of trees remained, casting pockets of shade on charred patches of ground and brush. Mule deer walked amid wisps of smoke.

He pointed excitedly at the scene. "You couldn't even get a fire going in there now," Kiper said, adding that the deer like the logging, too, because they graze on the cut vegetation and on new, green shoots that fill the opened-up areas.

Brent Skaggs, acting fire management officer for the Sequoia National Forest, said such logging allows monument officials to thin areas too thickly vegetated to burn safely. "It's a tool," he said. "When necessary, use it. When not, use prescribed fire."

The government's long-term goal, Skaggs said, is to use fire to burn out brush. But, he said, logging may still be needed in some circumstances.

"They are going to call them fuel reduction or restoration sales, but they will still be shipping products to the timber industry," Marderosian said. "That's commercial logging. A rose is a rose is a rose. By any other name, it still stinks."

Asked about Marderosian's view, Kiper shot back, "Well, let 'er burn then. That's what will happen. Honestly, it will.

"I've talked to environmentalists," he added with a sigh. "Most of them are reasonable people. In fact, a lot of them like what we're doing. But some don't."

Kiper -- who has logged in the Sequoia forest for more than 50 years -- said work in the woods is getting harder to find.

"We used to haul 100 loads a week -- and they were big logs," he said. "Now we're doing 30 -- and they are small."

As the logging work fades, help gets harder to find. "There's no future in it," Kiper said. On the current job, he said he's employing 18 men who earn an average of \$16 an hour. Families depend on this work, he said.

But economics take a back seat to forest protection for Marderosian -- a native of the East Coast who moved to Kernville, a mountain community southeast of the monument, more than a decade ago. An avid backpacker, he fell in love with the forest on long hikes through the woods.

Even though sequoias are not being cut, he said he believes they are in danger because commercial logging removes other trees -- pine, fir and cedar -- that keep the soil and forest shady and cool.

"The Sequoia National Forest is an island of trees surrounded by desert, " he said. "Every tree that is removed is opening the forest to become part of the desert."

For Kiper, that kind of future is hard to envision.

"You know what?" Kiper said sitting in the cab of his loader. "I've logged this area three times and I think it looks better every time I come back."

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Loggers say commercial logging helps to reduce fire danger in the forest, and makes life easier for mule deer, which can graze on plants in the opened-up areas. Sacramento Bee/
Hector Amezcua



"It's a benefit to the forest. ... I'll never be convinced any other way." - Harold Kiper,
timber company owner Sacramento Bee/ Hector Amezcua



"I hate it. They are turning this place into a desert." - Ara Marderosian, director of environmental group Sacramento Bee/ Hector Amezcua



Harold Kiper on Wednesday drives his pickup out of a Giant Sequoia National Monument parcel that his timber company was logging. Thinning out dense, fire-prone stands, Kiper believes, is good for the land. Sacramento Bee/ Hector Amezcua



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