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Log loads to SPI sidelined

By MIKE MORRIS

Shipments of timber from two fire-salvage sales in Amador County to Tuolumne County sawmills are on hold.

For the past several months, Sierra Pacific Industries has hauled wood from burned portions of the Eldorado National Forest to its Standard and Chinese Camp mills. The timber is from trees damaged in the Power and Freds fires of 2004, which together burned thousands of acres.

A federal appeals court judge in San Francisco two weeks ago sided with two environmental groups that challenged the timber sales and barred further shipments.

"These well-funded environmental groups seem to want to stop logging and forest management at any cost," said Mike Albrecht, president of Sierra Resource Management, a Sonoma-area logging company.

"To me, it sets a real bad, negative precedent for the future that we can't even salvage dead timber without a fight from some environmentalists. We really need to fight back."

Environmental groups Earth Island Institute and the Center for Biological Diversity in August filed the lawsuit in federal court in Sacramento on a variety of claims regarding the fire-salvage project. Among them: that thousands of the burned trees would survive if left alone, and that studies on damage to spotted owl habitat were improperly done.

The suit was rejected by the court and it was appealed to the San Francisco court.

"They grossly underestimated the impacts of these projects," said Rachel Fazio, an attorney with the John Muir Project of Earth Island Institute.

Ed Bond, spokesman for Redding-based SPI, said timber has already been cut on the forest and that some of it is even stacked and ready to be shipped to the mills.

"Things like this don't make any practical sense," he said. "It just doesn't make any sense to stop the fire sales."

Over time, Bond said, the timber will rot and be of no value to anyone.

Fazio countered that fire is a natural part of forest life. "If a fire burns a house, it is destroyed. That's not the same for a forest," she said. "It's rejuvenating. It's the forest's way of keeping itself healthy ... There's no reason to clear-cut it."

Albrecht, who is active in timber causes throughout the state, said he fears that the halted salvage sale will hurt more than the mills.

"It really hurts the local community to see a sale like that shut down," he said yesterday, speaking from a potential job site near Carson City, Nev. "Almost every logger in Tuolumne County has been working those fire (sales) for the past three, make that five, months."

Bond would not say specifically whether layoffs or lower production levels are possible at the local mills. "I don't want to cry

wolf at all, but this is restricting our ability to get the logs to the mills," he said.

Steve Sias, a power plant operator at SPI's Standard mill, said he and coworkers are monitoring the lawsuit.

"It's kind of a big disappointment," said Sias, who is active in the local lumber and sawmill union. "We were really looking forward to this sale."

A large majority of the logs from the sale have been removed, Fazio said. However, millions of board-feet remain either on the ground or stacked in decks ready to be shipped.

A board foot is an inch-thick, foot-square piece of lumber.

Fazio said she suspects the decked timber will be shipped. But she doesn't want to see that happen until drier weather returns in the spring.

"We feel this is most appropriate considering the area has been hammered out there," she said.

Heavy trucks, the lawyer said, have caused environmental damage and sediment runoff.

The environmental groups are seeking a permanent injunction to stop the logging.

Fazio anticipates an appellate court decision by the end of February that will either uphold or reject the U.S. District Court's decision in Sacramento to not grant the groups an injunction.