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The harshest cut

Sierra timber practices aren't front-page news anymore — but the brutal devastation of clear-cutting continues apace

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"I wake up at night at 3:30, hearing the logging trucks and knowing what's happening," Susan Robinson complains. "It makes me sick."

Robinson lives just off State Route 4 in Arnold, a Calaveras County community perched on the western slope of the Sierra.

For the past nine years, this feisty retiree has been clamoring to get Sierra Pacific Industries, California's leading timber company, to stop clear-cutting the forest. "I'm the daughter of a forester myself. I am not anti-logging," she told us. "Of course, SPI should be able to log its land. But it shouldn't have the right to obliterate everything."

Denuded forest near Arnold

A decade ago, logging and forestry practices in the Sierra were big news. Media reports, protests, and legislative action focused on SPI's practice of slicing through entire large tracts of land, hacking down every tree, bush, and seedling and leaving nothing but devastation behind.

But most of the news media have long since moved on to other issues — and the clear-cutting continues. If anything, the pace at which SPI is felling the forest has hastened since the intensive logging controversies grabbed headlines in the 1990s.

"When I recently read the June 2000 issue of the *Guardian* exposing SPI's activities in the Sierra, I was pained because I thought, 'Wow! This could have been written yesterday,'" said Marily Woodhouse, a Sierra Club organizer in Shasta County.

It's not as if nothing has changed under the Sierra sun. Some timber companies have adopted more responsible practices. But SPI is still a major problem. And as the largest private landowner in the state, its footprint is huge. Conservation activists have been exploring new opposition tactics while maintaining their diligent efforts on the legislative, legal, and educational fronts.

Susan Robinson and the other members of the Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch often take visitors to tour the backcountry roads and see the damage for themselves. On Winton Road, plots managed by SPI are adjacent to the Stanislaus National Forest, which is administered by the U.S. Forest Service — and the contrast is staggering.

Patches SPI harvested two years ago are still bare due to herbicide spraying. Between stumps, 10-inch-long replanted ponderosa pines may poke their frail limbs out of the churned soil, but there's nothing left on a 20-acre lot for deer, bobcats, raccoons, or woodpeckers to eat, rest on, or breed in. No bees pollinating. No chickarees denning. It will take decades for the seedlings to reach maturity.

On the opposite side of the gravel road, on Forest Service land, sugar pines, ponderosa pines, lodgepole pines, incense cedars, oaks, and white firs of different ages shelter ferns, mushrooms, and berry plants. The forest has been thinned to reduce fire hazard, but it has not been converted to a monoculture tree farm.

"What grows back after you clear-cut is a plantation," said Doug Bevington of Environment Now. "A forest is not simply a collection of trees. What makes a forest a vibrant ecosystem is its diversity, having different species and different ages. And it's the diversity of the forest that creates the habitat to support more species of life."

CLEAR-CUT FRENZY

You don't need to travel to the Sierra to get the picture — connecting to Google Earth will suffice. Zoom into Arnold and levitate above Highway 4. Beyond the lush forest "beauty strips," the landscape looks like a moth-eaten blanket of evergreens.

Over the past 10 years, SPI has clear-cut 18 square miles in Calaveras County alone. (Clear-cut also includes slightly more moderate logging techniques that leave few trees and snags remaining on an otherwise desert-like tract.)

State records show that between 1996 and 2006 SPI clear-cut 270,000 acres of forests and dumped 335,000 pounds of herbicide into the soil. That's roughly 420 square miles of scalped woodland. SPI isn't the only timber company clear-cutting in this state, it just happens to be the most zealous. And it owns 1.7 million acres.

Proponents and opponents of clear-cutting agree on one point: it's the most productive and the cheapest way to grow timber. But environmentalists say the ecosystems pay a heavy price for the practice.

Mark Pawlicki, SPI's director of government affairs, told us that the company meets the standards set by the state's Forest Practice Rules, and that Californian clear-cutting regulations are the strictest in the country. California allows 20 acre cuts; in Washington, the denuded area can reach 240 acres.

Timber harvest plans are not only reviewed the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), but also by the California Department of Fish and Game, the Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the California Geological Survey. Recently, SPI has even started to replant its clear-cuts with two or three different tree species.

The scientific community recognizes that clear-cutting has greater ecological impacts than any other harvesting method. Such radical treatment may be the only way to salvage logs from woods killed by insects or fire. And the industry is forced to mitigate some of the impacts — buffer zones, for instance, are required for waterways supporting aquatic life.

But that's not enough: the tiny tributaries feeding the waterways aren't protected, so sediment and debris can end up in the protected streams, affecting water quality, fish species, and amphibians. The water cycle is inevitably disrupted, with snowpack melting earlier in the season and rainfall running off the naked slopes. The fragmentation of the forest displaces animals that move around for their living, putting pressure on surrounding lands.

Environmental organizations are also concerned about exacerbation of climate change.

In national forests, clear-cutting has been phased out for more than a decade. Members of Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch wonder why the state can't make the same rules for private loggers.

"I do reckon that private companies have to make profits," said Forest Watch activist Addie Jacobson. "But we do see companies like Collins Pine harvest timber in a way that all of us are happy with yet make some profit."

GREEN WOOD

Collins Pine has been managing 94,000 acres of timberland in Plumas and Tehama counties since 1941. It primarily uses selective cutting, where only certain trees are sparsely removed. Chief forester Jay Francis says that after a month, you can hardly tell a logged area from a pristine one.

"Our owners do not want us to do anything that compromises the values of our Sierra mixed-conifer forest, whether its wildlife, clean water, recreation, esthetics," he told us. "So we do a very minor amount of clear-cutting. In fact, we just turned in a plan for a 15-acre clear-cut for health reasons. We have an infestation of root-rots in an area. That's probably the first clear-cut we've done in 50 years."

Those cuts are less than six acres wide, meeting the rules of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an international organization that certifies sustainable forest management. Since its inception in 1993, FSC has developed standards to accommodate the commercial, social, and environmental values of forestland. It has the backing of the world's leading environmental groups, including Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund. Consumers can rely on its label to buy environmentally and socially responsible wood products.

Collins Pine was the first privately held logging company in North America to receive FSC certification, in 1993. There are now 22 certified companies.

Gary Dodge, director of science at FSC U.S., contrasted FSC's approach to wildlife with CAL FIRE's, which only protects state-listed endangered species. "We also believe that it's the role of the forest to prevent common species from becoming rare, or prevent rare species from becoming extinct," he said.

In the iconic North Coast redwoods of Mendocino County, the Mendocino Redwood Company has taken its cue from Collins Pine. In 1998, MRC took over 228,800 acres from the environmental villain Louisiana Pacific. From the start, MRC managers stated that they aimed for the business to be a good steward and a successful business. The company received FSC certification in 2000.

"There are a lot of models for what it means to be a successful business, but there are fewer for what it means to be a steward of the land," Sandy Dean, chairman of MRC, told us. "We think quite literally that it is to leave it better than we found it. It includes a reduction in the level of harvest, the elimination of clear-cutting, and the adoption of a specific policy to protect old-growth trees."

SPI is not impressed by this trend. "By and large, the companies that exclusively use selective logging just have a different objective than we do," Pawlicki said. "They're not growing as much timber as we are."

SPI, nevertheless, is also using the buzz-word sustainability. According to Pawlicki, the state of California requires timber companies to be sustainable anyway. "You can't cut more than you grow under California law." Jumping on the green-building bandwagon, SPI has also sought certification — with an organization called the Sustainable Forest Initiative that is not recognized by the LEED green building rating system.

NEW BATTLEGROUNDS

These days, conservation activists are trying out new strategies to compel SPI to straighten up its act. ForestEthics' Save the Sierra campaign aims at protecting forests using the market as a weapon. "The average person may not have heard of SPI," said activist Joshua Buswell Charkow, "but they know its clients: Home Depot, Lowe's, Kolbe & Kolbe [Millwork Company].

Some environmental groups still resort to litigation. "I'm not too optimistic to think that the industry will reform itself," said Brendan Cummings from the Center for Biological Diversity.

The center recently filed three lawsuits against CAL FIRE for approving timber harvest plans without properly analyzing the greenhouse gas emissions from each specific project. Instead, the agency accepted SPI's broad assertion that growing its tree plantation over the next 100 years would offset the immediate carbon release caused by plowing the soil and burning the slash. But even if that's true, the nature of the climate crisis is such that we need to curb emissions right now, said Cummings. In response, SPI withdrew its plans.

Concerned Sierra citizens are also challenging logging plans in the courts. In Shasta County, Marily Woodhouse has been opposing a plan to clear-cut 809 acres in the vicinity of the Digger Creek that flows through her town of Manton for fear it will disrupt an already heavily logged watershed. The Battle Creek Alliance, the coalition she helped form, filed suit in January 2008. "What happens if they drop a plan? Eventually they come back again," she said.

"The lawsuits do slow things down. But the fact is, [the loggers are] never going away."

Past experience has taught activists to be wary. Ten years ago, when SPI's frenetic activity first came under public scrutiny, rallies and media coverage curtailed the timber giants' greed. Yuba Valley residents led a protest against a plan to scrape 171 acres along the banks of the South Yuba River. And farther South, locals from Arnold faced with an 884-acre clear-cut launched Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch. SPI kept a low profile for a while, even declaring to the press it would scale back clear-cutting in Calaveras County — only to redouble its practices a few months down the road.

The Yuba River site has been spared, thanks to the intervention of the Trust for Public Land, which has been able to purchase 110,000 acres from SPI. Those parcels, also located in the Tahoe region and Humboldt County, were transferred to public ownership for conservation.

On the policy front, Forests Forever has been leading the charge for 20 years. The lobbying group has sponsored three initiatives in Sacramento to ban or further restrict clear-cutting. The last bill was killed by the Assembly Natural Resources Committee in April 2008.

"There's a lingering sense that logging is still an economic driver in the state," said Forests Forever executive director Paul Hughes. "But tourism and retirement, which depend on healthy forests, actually contribute more to the economy."

Skeptics say that 80 percent of the wood used in California comes from Washington and Oregon or from the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Alberta, where clear-cutting is the norm anyway. But as Hughes put it, "You've got to start somewhere to fight this abomination."