

# Fire prevention and a weasel

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Nearly 50 Forest Service personnel, Sierra Club members, scientists, researchers and community members crowded into a conference room last week to discuss a growing concern for fire prevention.

The discussion boiled down to a key issue: how can the Forest Service mitigate wildfire, while preserving the habitat of the Pacific Fisher?

In order to understand the extent of that "conundrum," as it was referred during the meeting, one must become acquainted with SPLATS and SNAMP.

The independent group of scientific researchers, who facilitated the meeting and hail primarily from the University of California system, were sought by the Forest Service, in partnership with California Resources Agency and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in 2004 to form the Sierra Nevada Adaptive Management Project (SNAMP).

The project, which has several divisions, is meant to study wildfire prevention and advise future planning based on a broad study of forest health, water, wildlife and spatial analysis at a Northern site near Tahoe and the Southern site, here in the Oakhurst and Fish Camp Region from 2007 to 2014.

In a nutshell, the goal of the Southern project is for scientists to assist the Forest Service in planning for strategically placed landscape treatments (SPLATS). These landscape treatments include thinning vegetation to eliminate fire fuels and the reduction of forest density to fortify, primarily Ponderosa Pines, from drought and disease. These treatments are ultimately meant to restore the forest area to its pre-settlement state in the 1850s. Fire suppression over the past 100 years has altered the natural fire cycle of the forest from one of frequent low intensity fires to less frequent high intensity fires.

From 1990 to 2000, the population of people living near high to extreme fire threat areas grew 16 percent. As the mountain population increases, the fire risk also increases. A federal audit of the Forest Service determined that \$1 billion per year is spent for residential fire protection and the cost of Cal Fire's fire services rises 10 percent each year. Of the expected tripling of forest area population by 2040, 94 percent of the area slated for development is considered a fire hazard.

The landscape treatments proposed, however, are restricted by a 2004 Record of Decision, a legal document of environmental guidelines, which mandates a 700-acre zone of preservation for the Pacific Fisher, a state and federal species of concern. The Pacific Fisher is a small solitary weasel that is rarely seen and makes its den in rotting trees, tree cavities or rock crevices at 5,000-foot elevation in a mixed conifer habitat. The nocturnal animal moves its den, creating a large habitat area to be protected from commercial thinning.

According to Forest Service Bass Lake District Ranger Dave Martin, the boundaries, along with regulations for archeological sites and residential areas, tie the hands of the department and create an unworkable fire prevention plan.

The meeting was intended to give an opportunity for interested parties to voice questions or concerns. And participants did.

Among them was North Fork resident, Joanne Freemire who has been compelled to follow the study as both a resident with concerns about fire prevention (her home in Cascadel Heights was recently threatened by the outbreak of a fire close by) as well as one of the few who has seen a wild Pacific Fisher after moving to the area a few years ago. Freemire also attended a recent field trip hosted by the scientists to give locals an opportunity to see, first-hand, the process of study.

Freemire's questions and concerns ranged from how residents can help to thin out vegetation on private land, to how the Forest Service will preserve plant diversity when thinning on public land.

Researchers and Sierra Club members voiced concern over a proposal to redefine habitat preservation boundaries and suggested Forest Service thin in zoned areas first and measure success before expanding prevention boundaries. Another suggestion surfaced that the Forest Service thin as if den site were unknown and allow the researchers to monitor thinning effects on the weasels.

Martin assured the group that all input is welcome. "We continue to take on information and ideas before we commit to a contracted project," he said. "Fire will always burn in this ecosystem; we just want nice happy fires."

SNAMP facilitator, Kim Rodriguez, reiterated the commitment of the project leaders to receiving community input. "It's your meeting," she said to the group. "The ultimate purpose is collaboration. You are embarking on this with us."

Still in the early stages of what they call their adaptive management loop, no decisions were made at the meeting, but a follow-up discussion was proposed for October.

Interested parties may contact Anne Lombardo, SNAMP public participation coordinator for more information, (559) 676-0576; e-mail: [amlombardo@ucdavis.edu](mailto:amlombardo@ucdavis.edu); website: <http://snamp.cnr.berkeley.edu/>.