

It's time to weigh in on how to protect forests, wildlife from fire

Jill Coppler

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As winter temperatures rise and the Sierra snow pack declines, the clock is ticking for the Forest Service to begin the proposal phase of fire prevention treatments scheduled to begin midsummer.

"The reality is we need to get this project out there. The longer wait means more growth and more fire risk," said District Ranger Dave Martin at a Sierra Nevada Adaptive Management Project (SNAMP) meeting earlier this month.

Timing also has economic effects. The draft plan, which will be released for public comment by the end of the month, proposes mechanical thinning for fire prevention. In the course of time SNAMP research has been underway, the price of lumber has fallen significantly due to the lagging construction market. That means that, now, instead of the lumber removal paying for itself, the Forest Service will incur the cost of removal.

"We are not using economics as a reason to select one alternative over another," Martin said, but added that the lumber market may bounce back by the time the project begins.

Controlled burning is another way to thin, but strict air quality control measures restrict the Forest Service from burning, since the Forest Service has to compete for burn permits like any other entity and violations can result in loss of government funds.

The current draft plan is the fourth alternative considered by the Forest Service which has partnered with SNAMP. The partnership consists of the Forest Service, scientists and interested citizens, and utilizes scientific data and public comment in order to determine land management practices such as fire prevention treatments.

SNAMP scientists are engaged in a variety of environmental studies at two primary sites -- a northern site near Tahoe and the southern site, here in the Oakhurst and Fish Camp region.

A small mixed group including scientists, Sierra Club members, residents and Supervisor Tom Wheeler attended the most recent public meeting, held at the Forest Service headquarters in North Fork, in person or via teleconference.

There Martin described the progress of the project and the most recent fire prevention alternative that will be released formally for public review, although the process has been open to the public all along.

Thinning in the proposal will be bounded by 700-acre buffer zones that protect Pacific Fisher habitat, but absent from the newest alternative, is thinning for forest health, or thinning that would attempt to restore the forests to pre-settlement conditions.

Regional forests have, for almost 100 years, been managed with fire suppression which has allowed for significant undergrowth that competes with larger trees for water and also acts as fire fuel. Moreover, warming climate has allowed for more pathogens and insects that are detrimental to tree health.

According to a summary of each alternative which was passed out at the meeting, an analysis of the effects resulting from not thinning for forest health can be addressed for the entire area separately.

The treatment concept of thinning for fire and health management, however, has raised concerns over the potential to disrupt wildlife habitats and water -- risks the Forest Service hopes to mitigate with their alternative.

Too much thinning would negatively impact the fishers. A relative of minks, otters, and martens, fishers are solitary mammals which make their dens in rotting trees, tree cavities and thick growth areas.

"We cannot and will not endanger the fisher with this project," Martin said.

For more information, log on to <http://snamp.cnr.berkeley.edu/>.