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## A burning question

### Some fear that the closure of the state's farthest south sawmill eventually could lead to massive Sierra wildfires.

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TERRA BELLA -- Inside the cavernous sawmill, a big log thundered across a metallic platform. Bam! It crashed into position on a cutting track. Shriek! A band saw sliced it into thick, cream-colored slabs.

Another log rolled into place. The result: more noise, more boards and more conifer-scented sawdust that hung like a woody perfume in the air.

The pace of the action was frantic. But it was also misleading. For by June, the Sierra Forest Products mill here may be out of business, stilled by years of dogged environmental opposition that have throttled the flow of national forest timber from the southern Sierra Nevada.

If that happens, something more may disappear than the last sawmill south of the Tuolumne River. With it could go the best hope of managing the forest by thinning the dense stands of smaller trees sapping the health from the Sierra Nevada and fueling massive wildfires.

"Without a mill, forest management will virtually cease in the southern Sierra," said Larry Duysen, the mill's logging superintendent.

Two decades ago, more than 120 sawmills peppered California from Yreka to east of Los Angeles. But a steep drop in national forest logging has forced many to shut down. Now only 38 remain and about 8,000 workers have lost their jobs.

None is more imperiled than Sierra Forest Products, a four-decade-old facility sandwiched between two orange groves along County Road 234 south of Porterville.

Once, it ran two shifts -- now just one. Once, it employed 250 people -- now 130. Once, it had a mountain of logs available for cutting -- enough to last two years. Now less than six months' worth remain.

But while the industry's decline may appear to be a victory for the environment, it also comes with a catch. With California's forests growing more dense and fire-prone every year, who -- or what -- will thin the woods?

One answer can be found among the soot-black ridges and charred trees around Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear.

In the 1980s, a sawmill -- the Big Bear Lumber Co. in Redlands -- worked the area. But when the San Bernardino National Forest ratcheted down logging because of environmental concerns, the mill struggled and died.

The forest, though, kept growing. By the late 1990s, it was a tangle of trees competing for sunlight, moisture and nutrients. Then, drought struck. Trees grew weak -- and bark beetles finished them off. Stands that once glistened as green as Seven-Up bottles turned brown and yellow.

Worried homeowners and federal land managers began to clear out the dead trees. But with no local mill, progress was too slow, and too costly. Vast quantities of wood were buried in a landfill or burned. In October 2003, huge wildfires ripped through the area. More than 1,000 homes were destroyed; six people died.

Now, the southern swath of the Sierra Nevada "is starting to look like Big Bear seven, eight years ago," said Kent Duysen, general manager of Sierra Forest Products and Larry's brother. "We are encouraging the Forest Service to get geared up. Let's get ahead of the game."

The Duysens' chief opponents are environmentalists.

"Logging will increase, not decrease, fire risk," said Ara Marderosian, executive director of Sequoia ForestKeeper. "The time for compromise has ended; these forests are already depleted."

But the Duysens have also found an unlikely ally in the environmental camp: Craig Thomas, director of the Sierra Nevada Forest Protection Campaign.

"The service they provide, in terms of helping to reduce the fire hazard, is critically important," Thomas said. "All of us have an interest in them not going under."

The brothers also are taking matters into their own hands. Over the past year, they have spent \$2 million on new sawmill technology to cut the spindly trees most forestry experts say need to be cut.

The super-sized Sierra Nevada woods in which the Duysens work have long inspired tremendous awe -- and epic conflict. But there is one thing most agree on: the area is turning into a tinderbox of unnaturally dense trees, the unintended consequence of decades of fire suppression and timber sales that targeted big, fire-resilient trees, leaving behind the smaller ones.

Historically, fire pruned and pared and kept the woods open. And that is just what the Duysens say chain saws can do today.

To make their point, they pulled off a road in the Giant Sequoia National Monument where the woods were unusually thick. A hefty incense cedar, perhaps 40 inches in diameter, shot skyward, surrounded by smaller trees, 18 or so inches wide.

The smaller trees were marked with a blue paint, identifying them for cutting. But a U.S. District Court judge in San Francisco halted the project last year.

Approaching the large cedar, Tom Bonnicksen -- board member of the The Forest Foundation, a pro-industry nonprofit organization in Auburn -- said it would grow to be a real goliath if the others around it were cut.

"You can't get a big tree unless it's free to grow," said the retired forestry professor. "That's future old growth. An old incense cedar is a beautiful tree."

One aim of the stalled cutting project was to prevent a forest fire from growing so large it might destroy some of the giant sequoias, the closest of them over a mile away, which has never happened in recorded history.

"When the first one is lost, it's going to be an international calamity," Bonnicksen said.

Existing Forest Service rules forbid cutting trees over 30 inches in diameter, like the big cedar. But what makes environmentalists and some scientists nervous is that logging projects will target bulkier pine, fir and cedar -- those 20 inches to 30 inches in diameter -- and overlook the smaller stuff that poses the largest hazard.

The temptation is considerable. Heftier trees bring more money to the Forest Service and make more lumber at the mill. But cutting them is controversial because they also provide habitat for the Pacific fisher, a rare weasel-like animal that, like the spotted owl, is a symbol of old-growth forests.

"I would be the first to say there has to be some thinning," said Reginald Barrett, a professor of wildlife biology at the University of California, Berkeley. "The problem is, the way the Forest Service is proposing to do it, I think you are going to lose the fisher."

"The problem is nobody trusts the Forest Service," Barrett added. "And frankly, neither do I."

The roots of that distrust reach back to the 1980s, a time when heavy-handed Forest Service timber sales -- including clear-cuts and logging in sequoia groves -- stirred up a tempest.

Even the Duysens, who profited from that logging, were troubled, feeling the clear-cuts "were headed in the

wrong direction," Kent Duysen said.

Stung by criticism and legal challenges, the Forest Service dramatically scaled back. In 1985, 225 million board feet of lumber -- a river of wood 6 inches thick, 12 inches wide and 7,000 miles long -- were logged from the Sierra and Sequoia national forests.

Today, the harvest has plunged 90 percent to 23 million board feet and the Forest Service says its timber program is driven by environmental, not economic, goals.

The hope is to restore the southern Sierra to pre-settlement conditions, "to open, park-like stands with large diameter trees that were so widely spaced you could ride a horse through them," said Matt Mathes, a Forest Service spokesman.

But doing so will take a mill, he said.

"Without a market to purchase the excess wood, we will be forced to pay someone to remove it. That can cost \$1,000 an acre. ... That's unrealistic."

The showcase for the agency's efforts is the Kings River Project on the Sierra National Forest -- a plan to meld logging, prescribed burning and other strategies with scientific research to chart impacts on such environmental conditions as water quality and the fisher.

Much of what needs to be cut is the spindly stuff the Duysens want to run through their retooled mill. "If (the) Kings River (Project) stalls, there is just not enough wood to get us through the season," Kent Duysen said.

And stall it might. Thomas said his group plans to appeal over concerns about the fisher. But he also is working behind the scenes in Congress to keep the Duysens and their mill in business while the dispute is resolved. One possibility is financial support to make trucking logs from more distant locations affordable.

"It's important," said Thomas. "If there is no mill, how do we get the work done? Hand clippers are not going to solve the problem."

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