

Team monitors Pacific fisher in Sierra

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By Erik Skindrud / Special To Sacramento Bee

OAKHURST -- Deep in the Sierra National Forest, field biologists Carrie O'Brien and Jodi Berg pushed their way up a mountainside.

There was no trail to follow, just GPS readings to guide them through incense-cedar branches and mats of mountain misery. After half an hour they reached their goal -- a dead white fir tree.

This tree was special. Inside it, a mammal called a Pacific fisher was tending her young.

Experts want to know whether numbers are going up or down for the fisher, a member of the weasel family. The forest dweller is a candidate for listing as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act, and it's been at the center of rhetorical and legal fights for decades over timber-cutting in the Sierra.

O'Brien and Berg surveyed the scene. Three motion-activated cameras were strapped to nearby tree trunks. The big fir on Whisky Ridge jutted up in a clearing with a view of the snow-bright Sierra crest.

"She has some good real estate here," O'Brien said.

About 350 of the animals are estimated to live in the southern Sierra, and scientists believe there are no fisher in the Sierra north of the Merced River where it runs through Yosemite Valley. This means the animals around Oakhurst are cut off from the species' main range.

This summer, crews will log and thin brush in Sierra National Forest at Sugar Pine, a hamlet between Oakhurst and Yosemite National Park. Sugar Pine is in the scientists' study area, and several females have set up housekeeping there with their kits.

The work is part of U.S. Forest Service efforts to thin trees and remove brush where human settlements butt up against forests.

In the past, the coalition of environmental groups called Sierra Forest Legacy has sued the Forest Service over its logging plans. But this time, the coalition isn't challenging the Sugar Pine work.

The Forest Service has been trying to ease mistrust by sharing its scientists' information, and the fisher team will closely monitor the crews to see how the animals react.

"It's dicey because there are three denning females" at Sugar Pine, said Craig Thomas, the coalition's executive director. "But the Forest Service is being cautious. We are not opposed to careful experiment and learning."

The fisher study is just part of research on management of forest lands being conducted by the Sierra Nevada Adaptive Management Project, which is run by the University of California, the Forest Service and other agencies.

The effort has three years to go, but its scientists already have released some findings. Alarming, tests show rodent-killing pesticides in many fisher. Vehicles have killed many as well.

Forest Service officials hope the study will help defuse tensions over logging, fisher habitat and other issues. Such studies may even help prevent lawsuits, Forest Service representative Michael T. Chapel said.

"The fisher is like the spotted owl -- it's at the center of these tensions between environmentalists and those who make their living from forest products," Chapel said.

The 14-square-mile Sugar Pine area is just a small part of the 440-square-mile study area.

There is one bonus for the animals there -- the scientists know where the mothers and kits live and will pass that information to logging crews.

According to the fisher study's project manager, Rick Sweitzer of UC Berkeley, the southern Sierra fisher seems to be holding its own.

"The bad news is they're right on the edge," Sweitzer said. "If they had a bad year or years, they could slide into a decline."

He wonders whether the fisher could expand north into its lost range, and the scientists point to some good news.

They've known that a few of the animals are active in the southern part of Yosemite, but they had yet to document a mother with kits moving north from the Sierra National Forest into the park.

Last month, field biologist O'Brien tracked a radio-collared mother as she moved her youngsters to a new tree.

The fisher headed north and crossed the national forest boundary into Yosemite.