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Recent project recalls county logging heyday

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By Erik Skindrud GAZETTE REPORTER

From September to December, logging trucks rumbled across the county, following Highway 49 from south to north.

Some days several dozen lumbered through. Loaded with their forest cargo, the big rigs looked like something out of Oregon or California's north coast.

At least some of the logging traffic is set to resume this spring, said Dave Martin of Sierra National Forest's Bass Lake Ranger District.

Caltrans and Mariposa County highway experts are watching for any wear-and-tear the load creates, County Roads Superintendent Randy McAndrews said.

The heyday of logging in Mariposa County dates to 1852, when two men named Humphrey and Geiger built the county's first sawmill along Mariposa Creek.

Cutting kept saws and axes busy for close to 90 years—until World War II drew men to a more urgent cause.

This autumn's appearance of logging trucks was linked to a U.S. Forest Service effort that is scheduled to resume this spring, said Martin.

Unlike logging of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the recent cutting is a limited effort that is closely monitored by a team of experts.

Called the Sierra Nevada Adaptive Management Project, or SNAMP, the study is documenting the effects of logging on a rare mammal called the Pacific fisher. The effort is also watching how the limited logging affects water quality and other factors.

For close to two years, scientists have been watching trees where the fishers den in the logging zone. (Fisher are a member of the marten family.)

From September through December, crews removed smaller trees in the Sugar Pine area near Fish Camp while carefully avoiding fisher den trees.

The study seeks to balance comfort for the sensitive mammals and safety for humans by reducing fire danger.

The forest service wants "to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the forest,"

Sierra National Forest supervisor Scott Armentrout said.

The project is also creating jobs for loggers, truck drivers, scientists and others, he said.

Most of the logs heading north this autumn were incense-cedar destined for a processing plant at Chinese Camp in Stanislaus County.

Incense-cedar are cut into fence products at the mill, explained Mark

Pawlicki of Sierra Pacific

Industries—which operates the facility.

While most logging is shut down for the winter, residents may notice a lower volume of trucks plying the highway.

“If you start seeing a few more it’s because

(trucks) are bringing more timber north from private land near

Oakhurst,” Pawlicki said.

These trucks will be carrying incense-cedar to the fence mill and pine to another Sierra

Pacific Industries mill near Sonora.

The latter mill shut its doors from August of

2009 to this July due to lack of volume. When operating, the mill provides as many as 140 jobs, Pawlicki said.

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