Log Trucks Roll Down Highway 41

Written by **Anne Lombardo**

FISH CAMP - Where are all those logging trucks coming from? Or going to for that matter? All guessing aside, many of them are carrying logs from the Sugar Pine Fuels Reduction Project, along Highway 41 between Sugar Pine and Fish Camp.

This is a Forest Service project that has been in the planning stages for years. The thinning work has been going on since last summer and the majority of the work will be completed this year.

The thinning work covers about 1,800 acres, and has taken into consideration many different factors in its planning: fire hazard, private land, forest health, accessibility, slope, water courses, archaeological sites, and wildlife protection areas to name a few.

Although the Forest Service's main goal is to reduce fire hazard, concerns for tree health in an overcrowded forest also motivates them.

The current strategy for fire protection in our forests involves small patches of thinned areas spread out across the landscape. They are referred to as SPLATS, strategically placed landscape area treatments.

These areas are designed to help settle fire back down on the ground where it is easier to manage, slowing its overall pace and spread. The resulting increase in growing space and light for the trees left behind allows for healthier tree growth for those remaining; thereby improving forest health also.

The logs rolling down the road off the Sugar Pine project are under 30" in diameter, according to the rules under which the Forest Service functions for this project. If you see larger logs going down the road, they are probably part of a "road hazard" clean up in other parts of the forest, i.e., Beasore Rd.

The logs travel north to the Sierra Pacific Industries mill in Sonora. The only other mill in the area is in Porterville, so drive times for any logging truck in the area are long. Lumber mills have struggled to stay open in recent years and those that do remain have had to equip themselves for the smaller logs that are available these days.

This fuel reduction project is unusual in that it is being carefully studied by a group of University scientists through a project you may have heard of over the last few years called SNAMP, the Sierra Nevada Adaptive Management Project, **http://snamp.cnr.berkeley.edu.**

The study focuses on the effects of thinning on the health of the forest, the water that flows from it and the wildlife that lives in it. The Fires and Forest Health team focuses on measuring forest conditions and then using models to determine the extent of the resulting reduction in fire hazard.

The water team has instruments in local creeks measuring any changes in water flow, timing or turbidity that may result. And the wildlife team, here in the southern section of the two study sites, is focusing on the Pacific fisher, a rare nocturnal weasel.

We have had radio-tracking collars on about 30 of these elusive animals for several years now, learning a lot about the fisher's normal patterns, what they need to live and what kills them. You might see our Forest Service plane circling overhead sometimes, tracking the signals from the animals' collars.

The SNAMP wildlife team will continue to track the fisher after the thinning treatments are completed to measure the effect that these changes in the forest habitat bring to their daily routines, and how long these changes last.

Protecting forests from high severity fire while protecting wildlife, water and forest health is a delicate balance that state, federal and University experts are trying to learn more about together.

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