

Activists Decry Logging of Scenic State Forest

Short-term financial gain is driving a policy that sacrifices a precious resource, critics say.

By Evan Halper, Times Staff Writer

FORT BRAGG, Calif. — For years, a significant chunk of California's budget for forest restoration and protection has hinged on the logging of thousands of century-old redwoods in a state forest near the Mendocino coast.

To the chagrin of environmentalists, the scenic 50,000-acre Jackson Demonstration State Forest has been a cash cow, with woods full of 80- to 120-year-old trees generating as much as \$12 million annually.

One of the few remaining public redwood forests, Jackson was established more than 50 years ago as a place for the state to experiment with sustainable forestry. The concept was to promote more environmentally friendly harvesting practices while selling felled trees to raise money for government coffers.

Two years ago the logging was stopped when environmental groups successfully argued in court that the state's management plan failed to fully account for the effects of logging on water quality and wildlife.

But the state has since updated its management plan and last month accepted a \$3.4-million bid that will allow Schmidbauer Lumber Co. of Eureka to begin logging more than 400 acres in the next several weeks.

"This is a good deal for Californians," said Louis Blumberg, spokesman for the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. "Especially in this time of fiscal problems."

The money from logging goes to a variety of programs; the biggest amount pays for the maintenance of state forests and firefighting. But other money goes to pay private landowners — among them rural resorts and country clubs — to plant lesser trees to mitigate erosion and to thin the woods on their own land.

The latter program is viewed dubiously by local activists and major environmental groups.

"We are cutting down big redwoods in one place to plant tiny trees with low survival rates in another," said Paul Hughes, executive director of Forests Forever, a San Francisco-based environmental group. "It makes no sense."

By logging redwoods, activists say, the state is sacrificing a precious scenic resource to squeeze out as much money as possible during lean budget times.

With a different forest management, "You can bring back these 100-year-old redwoods at Jackson to something approaching ancient forests," Hughes said.

California officials say they are just doing the same kind of things that the state has been doing since 1947, when it acquired the forest from the Caspar Lumber Co. and allowed logging to continue.

California is among several states to profit from logging on public lands. Washington state, for example, sends

logging revenue to its school system.

Forestry spokesman Blumberg said that careful stewardship by the state has put the Jackson forest in far better shape now than when it was a messy patchwork of clear-cuts and roads 50 years ago.

"This is just what the Legislature had in mind when they made Jackson a 'demonstration forest,' " he said, adding that the forest was never intended to be a park and that the state is already preserving nearly a quarter of Jackson's second-growth trees.

The state allows logging in a few other public forests, but that amounts to only a fraction of the harvesting at Jackson.

UC Berkeley professor Kevin O'Hara, who is researching wildlife habitat at Jackson under a combination of government and industry grants, said the forest has been an invaluable tool for scientists.

"It lets us look at different ways we can manage these forests to get the wood people want while preserving habitat and water quality," O'Hara said. The work he has done in the forest has helped shed light on how to cut trees and build roads in ways that are less harmful to redwood ecosystems. Other researchers have used Jackson to study the genetic structure of redwoods and forest fires, he said.

After most of the old-growth trees were taken from Jackson in the early 1960s, Caspar Lumber left and California established the demonstration program that exists now. It calls for using the forest to experiment with sustainable harvesting techniques while generating revenue for forestry programs.

The mandate also calls for balancing that with environmental protection and recreation on the land. What constitutes sustainable forestry, however, has been a source of impassioned debate.

On a recent stroll into the forest, local activist Bill Heil, who makes a living cutting logs for area custom builders and craft shops, said the state is demonstrating little more than outdated management practices that are harming the environment.

Heil pointed to one of many large areas cleared by logging within the last few decades where a monoculture of young trees is now growing uniformly, crowded together with no room for sunlight to break through. He said the state should be selectively thinning those sections, creating scattered canopies for sunlight to break through to promote a healthy mix of trees and the return of wildlife.

But there are no profits to be made by such thinning, he said, so the areas are neglected.

"As far as I can tell, there is a lot of pressure for Sacramento to get as much money as they can out of this forest," he said. "If it was really a demonstration forest, they would use logging to demonstrate the most environmentally friendly methods."

The roads, Heil said, are anything but state of the art. He points to a few acres clear-cut to make room for heavy machinery, something he said could easily have been avoided. "This is the best they can do?" He asked.

The latest harvesting plan drawn up by the state involves leaving some acreage largely untouched while removing as much as 90% of the trees elsewhere.

Blumberg said the plan "mimics the natural disturbance regimen" and preserves a healthy mix of trees that are different sizes and ages.

Critics dismiss the practice as "fuzzy clear-cutting" and are trying to stop it with another lawsuit. But cutting back logging significantly at Jackson during the state's budget crisis could result in the elimination of some key forestry programs.

"The money all goes to important forestry-related resource-management programs," Blumberg said. Some programs "are quite essential."

The Sierra Club believes that, if trees were no longer cut, revenue could instead be generated through a proposal offered by state Sen. Sheila Kuehl (D-Santa Monica). Her bill, SB 557, would add a tax of one cent per board-foot of lumber sold to consumers.

"We don't think it is appropriate to log Jackson state forest to pay for these things," Sierra Club spokeswoman Kathy Bailey said.

The bill is opposed by timber companies, which warn that they are already operating at the margins and that a new tax could easily push some of them under.

The staff of Forests Forever, meanwhile, has taken a slightly different approach to the programs, questioning whether some are an appropriate place to spend public money. They ask whether the state should be providing reimbursements — sometimes for tens of thousands of dollars — to private landowners for tree planting, thinning, erosion control and other activities that increase the value of their own property.

According to state documents, recipients of the funding have included the Weesha Country Club in the San Bernardino Mountains, a favored spot for advertisers to shoot commercials for all-terrain vehicles and pickup trucks. The Arrowhead Lake Assn., a private community that owns and maintains the lake exclusively for members and guests, has also been a beneficiary.

State forestry officials defend the program as providing funds to landowners in areas that have been burned by wildfires and other places where reforestation is most in need. Homeowners around Lake Arrowhead, Hughes said, were prime candidates because the woods there have been devastated by the bark beetle and restoration efforts would be beneficial to the entire region.

"If the landowner meets the guidelines, they are eligible for grants," Hughes said. "If someone doesn't like the landowners who get them, I guess that's their prerogative."