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A modern lesson in Klamath forest from huge post-fire logging project

Plan calls for logging thousands of acres in Klamath National Forest

But science of post-fire management is compatible with economic realities

Other forest salvage plans call only for logging along roads, recreation areas

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Once upon a time in forests across the West, the massive logging plan approved for the Klamath National Forest would have been the norm. Designed in response to the 2014 lightning-sparked wildfires that burned 183,000 acres, the project approved Feb. 29 has all the hallmarks of a last-century get-out-the-cut timber sale.

The Westside Fire Recovery Project calls for removing scorched and green trees on 5,760 acres; logging in habitat set aside for the threatened northern spotted owl; and clear-cutting on steep slopes above streams federally designated to promote the long-term survival of coho salmon.

[Opponents](#) cite violations of the Endangered Species Act and national forest regulations, including the 1994 [Northwest Forest Plan](#) to protect spotted owls.

In her 96-page [decision](#), Klamath Forest Supervisor Patricia Grantham justifies the size and location of the logging sites with the financial benefits to the local community. She chose them, she says, with “an eye toward economic viability.”

Among national forest responses to the fires in recent years, the Klamath project is a throwback. The trend is toward multiple small projects prioritizing burned trees that jeopardize public safety. On the Shasta-Trinity Forest, where 2015 fires burned 186,000 acres, officials are proposing 8,000 acres of logging along roads and in recreation areas. No clear-cuts. In the aftermath of last year’s 73,137-acre Mad and Route fire complexes, the Six Rivers Forest is proposing to harvest hazardous trees on 250 acres near roads. Nothing else.

Even after the colossal 257,000-acre Rim Fire, where Forest Service officials were under political pressure to log everything without an environmental review, they instead reduced salvage logging to 17,327 acres plus 17,706 acres along roads and trails.

Most scientists [agree](#) that removing burned trees to salvage their commercial value is an economic decision that does not contribute to ecosystem recovery. Logging eliminates habitat for an entire suite of [fire-dependent species](#). The heavy equipment compacts the soil, and the trees planted after salvage logging are a monoculture more vulnerable to fire than the standing dead trees they replace.

The science of post-fire management is oddly compatible with the economic realities facing national forest managers. Large salvage sales require in-depth environmental analyses and can take years to complete. Most attract litigation, leaving dead and dying trees to rot while [opponents](#) duke it out in court.

Witness the 28 million board-feet of scorched timber offered to loggers after the 2012 Bagley Fire. By the time Shasta-Trinity Forest officials won approval for their post-fire project, the value of the wood had deteriorated. No one bought it.

Lesson learned, forest spokeswoman Andrea Crain said: “If we shoot for the moon with big sales we lose the value of the timber.” So the Shasta-Trinity and other forests have turned to small projects focused on hazardous trees.

Not the Klamath. Its Westside project employed fast-track emergency regulations designed to make burned timber available to sawmills as early as last summer. Most is still in the woods.

That's as frustrating to Karuk Tribal Chairman Russell Attebery as it must be to Grantham, the forest supervisor. Attebery developed an [alternative](#) to Grantham's proposal that would reduce the volume of logging but avoid delays caused by lawsuits. The Karuk alternative won support from Center for Biological Diversity, EPIC and Klamath Wild, the groups lining up to litigate the proposal.

Grantham did not analyze it. "They told us to pound sand," said Craig Tucker, the tribe's natural resource policy advocate.

The day after Grantham signed the Westside project decision, the Karuk Tribe joined other opponents filing a federal lawsuit that seeks an immediate injunction.

For national forests officials dealing with burned timber from increasingly large fires, going big may mean going bust. At a time of rare alignment between science and economic reality, Klamath Forest officials should heed that enigmatic Zen doctrine: Less is more.

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