THE SACRAMENTO BEE

California's prized forests are falling to development | The Sacramento Bee

Collins Pine Co., a private timber company in Plumas County, manages this stand of mixed conifers in the Deer Creek watershed near Lassen Volcanic National Park. **Nick Kent**

CALIFORNIA FORUM

California is losing its prized rural forestland, one luxury home and one ski run at a time

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE
jblittle@dyerpress.com

DECEMBER 01, 2017 03:55 AM

UPDATED DECEMBER 02, 2017 08:03 AM

California values forests. From coastal stands of iconic redwoods to high-elevation pines, trees cover 33 million acres, nearly one-third of the state. Private owners manage around 40 percent of these forests, an area more than twice the size of Alaska's Denali National Park.

Today California is losing these prized forestlands incrementally – one luxury home, one ski run at a time.

Lawmakers have historically recognized the critical role private forests play in the state's economy and beyond: providing water and wildlife habitat, storing carbon, creating and retaining soil. Among the steps they have taken to protect timberlands is the Forest Taxation Reform Act of 1976, the cornerstone of California forest policy. It establishes Timber Production Zoning (TPZ) designed to promote the long-term growth of timber on private lands by offering tax incentives that encourage protection of young trees and restrict other land uses.

Instead of taxing owners on the market value of their standing timber, the act values timberland based on its ability to produce timber. In exchange for a commitment to manage their forests for timber production for 10 years, landowners enjoy generous property-tax reductions.

Despite these safeguards, the very forests this landmark legislation is designed to protect are in jeopardy. As the demand for rural recreation and housing grows, TPZ landowners are increasingly looking for ways to cash in. And county officials, tasked with implementing timber production zoning, are increasingly bowing to the pressure.

Take Placer County, where supervisors rezoned 662 acres designated for timber production to allow 760 residences and commercial development on forestland adjacent to the Lake Tahoe Basin owned by Sierra Pacific Industries.

The October 2016 decision used a discretionary provision to bypass the 10-year wait without adequately documenting specific findings to support its decision, said Tom Mooers, executive director of Sierra Watch. Along with the impact on timberland, the new development will affect traffic, the clarity of Lake Tahoe and starry night skies.

California taxpayers did not mean to give timber companies a tax deduction for replacing trees with luxury homes. Keeping forests available for the long term is a primary goal of the 1976 legislation. Sierra Watch has challenged the zone change in a case scheduled to be heard Dec. 14 in Placer Superior Court.

In Plumas County officials revised the county general plan in 2013, modifying the restrictions on development in a timber production zone to allow residential construction. Sierra Pacific Industries and other corporate timber owners requested the change to accommodate new uses on their land "because timber is not enough," said Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Lori Simpson. The supervisors obliged, dropping the state-mandated review to determine that residences are compatible with and necessary for timber management.

Their decision allows the unregulated development that is precisely what TPZ regulations are designed to prevent. After enjoying decades of reduced taxes in exchange for managing to produce timber, owners now see more profitable uses for their land, said Stevee Duber, CEO of High Sierra Rural Alliance: "They want to have their cake and eat it, too."

In February Placer County amended its zoning code to allow ski lifts and runs in TPZs. That's a boon to Northstar Resort, which can now rezone its forest properties to timber production at a tax savings of nearly $1500 an acre. How it will be possible to grow and harvest timber in the midst of a ski resort is a question the Placer supervisors apparently chose not to address.

Piecemeal relaxation of the state's timberland protections will not fell the world's forests, or even California's, but it is chipping away at the economic and ecological fabric of forestlands. That adds to the global loss of tree cover, an astonishing 73.4 million acres in 2016.

Along with the trees themselves, each loss lessens the amount of carbon stored and increases the carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere of a state committed to curbing climate change.

California taxpayers intended TPZ tax relief to benefit forests, not for-profit developers. If county officials continue to cave in an isolated decision here, one there, private timberlands are doomed to death by a thousand ax whacks.

Jane Braxton Little, a freelance writer, covers science, natural resources and rural Northern California from Plumas County.