

Ground zero in timber wars shows signs of peace

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In this May 15, 2009 photo, Lomakotsi Restoration Project crew supervisor Aaron Nauth stands on the stump of a centuries old tree and looks over an old clearcut that his team has thinned on the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest outside Takilma, Ore. (AP Photo/Jeff Barnard)

(AP) -- On a steep slope of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest, a crew of young men with chain saws and hardhats worked their way through an old neglected clearcut, cutting brush and young trees and piling the remains to be burned later.

Freshly trained and closely supervised, the crew took care to leave behind volunteer sproutings of dogwood, madrone and huckleberry as well as the sugar pine and Douglas fir planted here 20 years ago. The pattern is designed to grow into a healthy forest less vulnerable to wildfire and better for fish and wildlife, rather than just turn out timber.

The House Hope Stewardship Project, taken off the shelf with \$1.4 million from President Barack Obama's [economic stimulus package](#), will thin and restore 890 acres.

It's a tiny fraction of the 60 million to 80 million acres the U.S. Forest Service estimates need it nationwide, but people here feel as if this is a start - not only to grappling with the growing threat of wildfire in a warming climate, but in healing rifts between environmentalists, the timber industry and the Forest Service that have left the national forests in limbo.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say there is peace in the valley, but we are closer than ever before," said Shane Jimerfield, director of the Siskiyou Project, a local [conservation](#) group that grew out of the protests.

The national forests of the Northwest became a crucial national lumber source after World War II when the baby boom fueled a huge demand for new houses. But by the 1980s scientists began to worry that species like the northern spotted owl and some salmon were headed for extinction due to a loss of habitat.

Environmentalists won court orders stopping that logging, and the Clinton administration came up with the Northwest Forest Plan in 1994, which cut logging by more than 80 percent and set aside huge areas for fish and wildlife habitat. After President George W. Bush was elected in 2000 his administration tried to dismantle the Northwest Forest Plan and increase logging but was repeatedly blocked by more court rulings.

Few of the thinning crew were even born when the Klamath Mountains of southwestern Oregon and Northern California became ground zero in the Northwest timber wars. This is the first place Earth First! protesters ever put their bodies on the line to stop logging in old growth forests, at a place called Bald Mountain.

As the battles moved from tree sitting to courtrooms, little national forest timber went to the mills, and thinning projects were scattered and not focused around the homes they were supposed to protect.

Now, another corner has been turned. The landscape here offers a hint of how national forests around the country might look as a result of a new focus on preventing wildfires and global warming, and enhancing fish and wildlife habitat.

Environmentalists are welcoming the sound of chain saws helping to reduce fire danger and restore ecosystem balance, and they're not alone.

The last sawmill standing in the area has adopted green certification because it makes sense for its struggling bottom line, and the local forest ranger has 10 years of work planned out covering 10,000 acres - including timber sales that will provide logs for the mill - without a single protest, appeal or lawsuit to stop them.

Siskiyou Project and Lomakatsi, a forest restoration outfit, have signed a groundbreaking contract with the Forest Service to cooperate not only to restore forests, but to provide logs to feed sawmills and biomass to fuel the lumber drying kilns and biomass generators they have built while adapting to a greener economy.

"If what you are doing isn't working and we keep doing it, it is a definition of insanity," said Joel King, ranger for the Wild Rivers Ranger District. "So I needed to do something different.

"The way the Forest Service looks at it, we are doing forest restoration, and if wood products come out of that, why not?" It seems inevitable, he said, that the approach here will spread.

The folks at the Rough & Ready Lumber Co. mill in O'Brien, the last

mill in the Illinois Valley, haven't been able to buy a log from the national forest that surrounds them since 1997, depending instead on logs from private lands. Neither have they been able to buy trimmings from thinning projects to fuel a co-generation plant they built a couple years ago to power lumber drying kilns and produce renewable electricity.

To tap into California markets demanding lumber that qualifies for green building codes, Rough & Ready this year had its pine production stream certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, the model embraced by environmentalists, rather than a competing one created by the timber industry. With demand for energy-efficient homes growing, the mill is kiln-drying more of its Douglas fir lumber. That means fewer mold problems in tightly built houses, and less weight to haul in trucks. A co-generation plant fueled by milling scraps and forest thinnings powers the drying kiln, and produces electricity that goes back into the grid.

"This is all great, the co-gen plant and drying lumber," said Jennifer Phillippi, the third generation of her family to run Rough & Ready, and a member of the Oregon Board of Forestry. "But we still need logs to run the mill. I just hope we figure it out before things get too bad in the forest. It's really not a sustainable model the way it is."

No one is more aware of that than King. For the past decade, forest fires have been getting bigger and hotter and more expensive to put out, and he expects that trend to continue as summers get longer and hotter with global warming. And there are more houses in the woods to worry about. Besides the costs and danger, fires send huge amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, where they contribute to the greenhouse effect.

To illustrate the challenge, King shows a visitor adjacent stands of trees.

On one side of a logging road is a stand of spindly pine and fir so close

together you can't walk through them, covered with scars from insect and fungus damage.

Across the road, where the thinning crew is at work, a young sugar pine shoots out new growth in every direction. Nearby a huge dead Douglas fir is riddled with holes from feeding woodpeckers, and dogwoods bloom.

"It's right before our eyes," said King. "These forests built our courthouses, our schools, our homes. We have that responsibility to make it sustainable."

The stakes are high. Last year he spent \$6 million in two weeks putting out a fire that burned through 1,000 acres. Before he took over, the Biscuit fire burned through 500,000 acres in 2002 and cost more than \$150 million to put out.

King views the decades of conflict between tree sitters and loggers as a necessary stage before this move toward resolution could happen.

"Without that energy level, without that passion and caring, we can't do this," he said.

The Obama administration has not strongly signaled where it intends to point forest policy, though it has called a time-out on the Bush administration's efforts to log and mine in untouched parts of national forests known as roadless areas. It is also reviewing whether to defend in court a plan to ramp up logging in western Oregon.

Longtime observers of national forest policy, like Takilma resident Mark Kelz, are used to big swings in forest policy, but looking forward to some consistency.

Kelz moved here in 1970, working on a tree-planting crew, and now makes his living making Adirondack-style backpacks of woven ash splints. He lives at The Meadows, a community of four families living off the grid and growing their own food on an old hydraulic gold-mining site. They can see some of the restoration thinning sites on old clearcuts on the hills around them; in 1987, they watched the Longwood fire burn toward their homes.

"I'm kind of hopeful and kind of skeptical too, because there've been a lot of fashions in forestry over the years," said Kelz. "For a while, they were hiring us to go clean the logs out of the streams (to improve salmon habitat). They would pay us to do it. A few years later, they were hiring us to throw the same wood back into the streams.

"Then there was the monoculture," where nothing but Douglas fir and pine would be planted in clearcuts to maximize the timber yield in coming years.

He added: "Now they are like, 'We need diversity. It's not healthy.' They've learned a lot, but they still have a lot to learn."

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