

USFS moves Lake Tahoe logging for woodpecker; still criticized

By Scott Sonner, AP

U.S. Forest Service officials have agreed to move post-Angora Fire logging operations farther away from nests with rare, black-backed woodpecker chicks at the request of conservationists who've been fighting the overall project for years.

But John Muir Project members – who have documented one nest in the path of the logging and suspect there are more – say the no-cut buffers the agency is implementing are far too small to protect one of the rarest birds in the Sierra Nevada.

“No credible black-backed woodpecker scientist would say it is enough – not even close,” said Chad Hanson, a wildlife ecologist and executive director of the group who has filed a petition seeking protection of the bird under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.



A sign at the end of Seneca Road explains restoration efforts by the U.S. Forest

Service in the Angora burn.

Photo/LTN

“It will kill them just as surely as logging right up to the nest tree,” he said.

Lawyers for the Forest Service told the group recently its proposed 60-acre buffers around each nest would undermine the 1,400-acre project’s goals of restoring the forest and reducing future catastrophic risks where the Angora Fire destroyed 254 homes in South Lake Tahoe in 2007.

But Deputy Forest Supervisor Jeff Marsolais said Friday the agency and the private logging contractor agreed to move the fuels reduction operations at least 10 acres away from the nesting area until the chicks leave the nest. One acre is a little less than the size of a football field.

“The relocation shows our ongoing commitment to balance ecosystem values and our intent to maintain efficient operations in completing our Angora restoration efforts,” Marsolais said in a statement the agency provided to the Associated Press late Friday.

In addition to no logging within 10 to 12 acres of the identified nest tree, an additional 25 acres of habitat will be preserved within one-quarter mile of the tree, until the chicks “fledge,” USFS spokeswoman Cheva Heck said.

The area includes some of the last of the 156 acres of forest that remains uncut in the overall 1,400-acre project first proposed in early 2009 and under way for more than a year.

A federal judge in Sacramento earlier rejected a request for an injunction to block the logging filed by the John Muir Project and its parent Earth Island Institute.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals currently is considering their appeal claiming the Forest Service’s environmental

assessment ignores the agency's own science suggesting the project will harm the bird without effectively reducing long-term fire threats.

Hanson said the Forest Service's science consistently shows one pair of black-backed woodpeckers needs 100 to 200 acres of good habitat with a minimum 60-acre core for foraging. He said the latest logging will come so close to the nest tree that the noise alone may cause the adult birds to abandon the nest.

Rachel Fazio, a lawyer for the group who argued its case in the 9th Circuit last month in San Francisco, said it made no sense to rush to log the last remnants of the project area given it was more than 90 percent complete and therefore, based on the agency's arguments, had already reduced fire threats accordingly.

Fazio said the chicks may "fledge" – or fly for the first time – within about three weeks but would remain dependent on their parents weeks longer and be especially vulnerable to predators.

"It will just be a little island of habitat so that maybe the birds survive for a week or so," she said.

Hanson said the additional 25 acres of habitat retained within a quarter mile – approximately 400 meters – is too far away for a bird that historically won't travel more than 150 meters at a time in unsheltered forest for fear of becoming someone else's dinner.

Hanson said the Forest Service took the same approach – unsuccessfully – with a post-fire logging project in the neighboring Eldorado National Forest, leaving uncut three 40- to 50-acre patches of black-backed woodpecker habitat after the 2004 Freds Fire near Kyburz.

"They tested this exact theory before, and it didn't work," he said. "No one has been able to find woodpeckers near any of

those patches since then.”

Heck said the agency is leaving intact about 1,168 acres of burned forest for the woodpeckers and other wildlife – approximately 43 percent of the area charred to varying degrees over more than 3,000 acres.

But Fazio said that less than 800 acres of that 1,168 is considered suitable for the black-backed woodpeckers, which are highly dependent on the most intensely burned forest habitat for the beetle larvae they peck from the bark.

Heck said she couldn't comment directly on that claim because it's part of the ongoing litigation. She said the district court has denied the group's request for an injunction blocking the logging “citing the project's benefits to the public interest.”