

USFS sacrificing conifers for aspens draws ire of residents near Truckee

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

Like a steeple, the Jeffrey pine towers over other conifers and quaking aspen in the Tahoe National Forest north of Truckee.

Nearly 13 feet around at its base and believed to be about 250 to 300 years old, it has weathered every threat to come its way, including wildfire, drought, storms and logging.

Now it is slated to fall to a modern force: environmental restoration.

As part of a Forest Service effort to return Sierra forests to their pre-settlement glory, this tree is one of many conifers – large and small – the agency has designated for logging to help aspen, which its research shows is in danger.

“We need to be doing everything we can to help promote and foster these aspen stands,” said Quentin Youngblood, the Sierraville district ranger for the Tahoe National Forest. “And quite frankly, there are some tough choices.”

But as trees crash to the ground this summer, anger is growing among environmentalists and area residents who say the effort is heavy-handed and environmentally risky.

“I think they are going to destroy more than they are going to restore,” said Tom Leavell, a rancher whose cattle graze on Forest Service land in the logging zone. “Nature put everything together for a reason. As soon as we go in messing with it, something else happens.”

The project is part of a wider pattern. No longer is agency logging just about timber production. Now, it's often aimed at healing past mistakes and restoring nature's bounty.

Playing God with nature is often fraught with risk, of course. But what also makes some scientists uneasy about the Tahoe project is that the Forest Service is logging one cherished Sierra icon to help another.

Read the whole story