

# Opinion: USFS clear-cutting in Tahoe National Forest is bad policy

By Chad Hanson

Many people believe that extensive commercial logging on our national forests, especially clear-cutting, is a thing of the past – something that ceased back in the 1980s. Unfortunately, the U.S. Forest Service is now clear-cutting old-growth forests again on our public lands at taxpayer expense.

A current example is the Outback logging project north of Independence Lake in the Tahoe National Forest, where the agency is clear-cutting nearly 500 acres of old-growth forest. The Forest Service knows that public opposition to commercial logging on public lands has grown over the years, so the agency, with a wink and a nod, has creatively promoted the Outback project and others like it as “ecological restoration” and “forest health.”

Tens of millions of taxpayer dollars are spent every year subsidizing commercial logging on our public lands, and the Forest Service profits not only from these funds, but also from the timber sales revenue generated by selling trees on national forests to private logging corporations. The agency keeps most of the revenue for its own budget.

With such a perverse incentive for forest management abuse on public lands, it is no wonder the agency is increasingly finding creative ways to justify selling large trees, including old-growth trees, for its own profit. In order to do so, however, it must mislead the public and misrepresent the science.

In the environmental assessment for the Outback project, for

example, the Forest Service claims that some logging of conifer trees is needed in order to promote growth and regeneration of aspen stands. However, the existing science simply does not support the notion that old-growth forest must be clear-cut in order to accomplish this. Far from it.

In fact, the Forest Service's own study, conducted in the northern Sierra Nevada, found that thinning only smaller, younger trees within just 30 feet of aspen stands effectively encouraged aspen growth and regeneration. In stark contrast, in the Outback project the Forest Service is clear-cutting 150 feet or more from aspen trees in huge swaths, even removing the great majority of the large conifers 8 feet around and bigger, which are 250 to 300 years old based upon my count of the tree rings. Some even larger, older trees are slated for logging if the agency completes the remaining 200 acres of the Outback project.

Like a time warp back to the 1980s, the Outback environmental assessment also suggests that this extreme commercial logging is somehow necessary in order to "reduce fuels" and prevent patches of higher-intensity wildland fire where most of the trees are killed. However, it has been well known and established scientifically for many years that aspen regenerates and grows most vigorously after wildland fire, especially where fire burns hotter.

It has also been known now for decades that such post-fire areas, called "snag forest habitat," are a natural part of the mixed-intensity fire regimes in these forests and, unlike clear-cuts, comprise one of the most biodiverse and ecologically important forest habitat types in Western forests, due to standing dead trees. The snags, as they are called, are used for foraging and nesting by native woodpeckers, such as the rare and imperiled black-backed woodpecker, as well as native flowering shrubs and dense pockets of natural forest regeneration, which provide habitat for many small mammals, native species of flying insects and

the flycatchers and other birds that feed upon them.

So, if you hike around on our national forests these days, prepare yourself. With projects like Outback, and the self-serving Orwellian doublespeak used to justify it, what you see may look and feel a lot like 1984.

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