

USFS refuses to limit logging north of Truckee

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

Standing amid a scattering of stumps last week, an official from the U.S. Forest Service acknowledged the agency made mistakes by logging too many pine trees, including majestic old-growth giants, in an effort to help another Tahoe species: the quaking aspen.

But he rejected calls from local residents that the Tahoe National Forest sharply scale back the cutting along Independence Creek north of Truckee.

“Are there places where there are some trees that I’ve seen out here – some live trees still standing and some stumps – that I would have preferred be marked for retention? Yes,” said Tom Quinn, supervisor of the Tahoe National Forest.

His comments came at a meeting on Friday in the field with local residents and environmentalists to discuss the Outback Aspen Restoration Project. The project, which aims to promote aspen groves by logging conifers that compete with them, was the subject of a Bee story in August.

It entails toppling conifers – large and small – as far as 150 feet away from aspen, leaving large swaths of the Tahoe forest looking as bare as a shorn sheep. The idea is to remove conifers that have grown thick over the past century of fire suppression, allowing aspen the chance to expand and thrive.

The extensive cutting has incensed residents and conservationists, who were out in force at Friday’s meeting.

“We are shocked at the situation, the catastrophic damage being done by our government with absolutely no care for

public input," said Mary Leavell, who grazes cattle in the national forest with her husband.

"We all ultimately want forest health," said Lauren Ranz, who lives part-time on a former 450-acre ranch near the logging zone. "But I don't think this is the way to get it."

Despite his concerns about cutting too many large, old trees, Quinn defended the project.

"To hear words today like devastated, destroyed ... I can't accept those words," Quinn said.

He said the agency's decision to allow the cutting of old-growth trees was consistent with the goal of aspen restoration, even though it angered neighbors.

"They were probably social mistakes, more than ecological mistakes," he said of the agency's actions.

To try to quell criticism, Quinn announced that Forest Service officials have decided to halt logging of conifers 40 inches in diameter or greater on the remaining 190 acres of the 479-acre project. But he rejected suggestions to limit cutting to trees 30 inches in diameter or less.

"We will not sacrifice the ultimate goal of the aspen restoration for retaining trees that some perceive as old-growth," Quinn said.

"I'm extremely disappointed," said Fred Mitchell who lives on 80 acres near where the cutting is taking place. "There are so few trees 40 inches and above, anyway.

"They're brushing off the public like we are a minor nuisance, like we don't count for anything," Mitchell added.

Mitchell is one of a group of residents who have marshaled opposition by handing out flyers, contacting lawyers, political representatives and environmentalists, even placing

mock tombstones on the stumps of large trees – some more than 2 centuries old – that have been logged.

“It’s not what they told us it would be,” said Gary Risse, a part-time area resident who is among those opposed. “I can tell you without a doubt there was no mention of clear-cuts whatsoever. That would have stopped it.”

Quinn said there was no intent to mislead.

“Am I disappointed at what most of you perceive as lack of transparency on this project? Very much so,” he said. “I don’t know how that happened. I guarantee you it wasn’t to be sneaky, surreptitious, to sneak this under the radar.”

Forest Service officials said the logging is supported by abundant agency science. But Chad Hanson, director and staff ecologist for the John Muir Project, said other agency projects have succeeded with less intense cutting.

“Scientific studies ... do not support the assumption that you need to clear-cut forests, especially 150 feet or more away from aspen stands, or that you need to remove old-growth trees,” he said. “That is not scientifically necessary.”

Residents fear erosion will sweep off heavily logged sites this winter, polluting streams, and that stands of quaking aspen – without the shelter of surrounding conifers – will be toppled by wind and snow.

“We don’t all have to be scientists to know that this is absolutely destructive,” said Mary Leavell, the rancher. “I am appalled.”

They said too many big trees have been cut.

“I’ve covered about 300 acres of this project looking for legacy (old-growth) trees,” Mitchell said. “From what I can gather, there has only been one legacy tree left for every four and a quarter acres, which is not a very good number.”

Quinn, standing in one heavily logged zone Friday, defended the heavy cutting, saying it would benefit aspen.

“This I do not apologize for, if anyone was looking for an apology. If we are going to get aspen on the landscape, this is the type of treatment we are going to be doing.”

But he did acknowledge the logging has been more far-reaching than he would have liked.

“To have a 479-acre project and aggressively pursue aspen restoration on all 479 acres perhaps is something we need to rethink, even though we do need more and more aspen,” Quinn said.