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Sierra National Forest brings foes together for restoration

With more than 1 million acres east of Fresno, the Sierra National Forest was a big, quiet part of California's environmental wars during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Nevertheless, like the rest of the mountain range, environmentalists and federal agencies have clashed here over the thinning of overgrown forests, protection of dwindling species and preserving large, older trees.

Now the Sierra National Forest will be among the first forests in the country to take a new approach in revising its plans to restore the resiliency of the thick forest, which is now susceptible to catastrophic wildfire and insect infestations.

If you're not familiar with the Sierra National Forest, think of such landmarks as Southern California Edison's Shaver and Huntington lakes. The forest surrounds these private lands.

Starting next month, the U.S. Forest Service will ask for help in revising its management plans. Leaders will ask lots of folks -- environmentalists, the timber industry, recreation enthusiasts, tribal leaders, surrounding communities and private landowners, such as Southern California Edison.

In three years, Sierra forest leaders hope to build a route around chronic gridlock that has held up many kinds of projects for the last two decades.

"We won't have just a Forest Service plan," said Scott Armentrout, forest supervisor for the Sierra National Forest. "We will have a clearer, simpler document that won't surprise anybody."

One environmentalist, Craig Thomas of the Sierra Forest Legacy, sees promise. He says he's already working closely with the Sierra National Forest and other stakeholders on the Dinkey Creek Landscape Restoration Collaboration. Debates are intense in the collaborative, Thomas says, but everyone seems sincere, and the group is settling issues.

Thomas says the conversation is based in science, which is a refreshing change from the past two decades. He remains cautious about the process, though.

"I'm not suggesting we're giving up litigation," says Thomas. "But we were all getting tired of communicating only with legal papers back and forth. When good research is framing the argument, it's possible to make progress."

Kent Duysen, who runs a sawmill that depends on timber from the Sierra Nevada, agrees with Thomas that the collaborative is helping.

Duysen is general manager of Sierra Forest Products in Terra Bella. The mill has been forced to slash half its staff from 240 workers to 120 as timber projects have slowed down and shrunk.

Now he says there is hope, not only for his business but for the health of the forest.

"It's a lot of work," he says. "But it has been very positive over the last two years. We need to manage this forest. We can't just do nothing."

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