

Reforestation plan for area hit by Rim Fire advances

Timber-environmentalist coalition endorses planting on 21,300 acres

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A plan for reforestation part of the Rim Fire area took a major step forward Friday.

Jeanne Higgins, supervisor of the Stanislaus National Forest, approved a proposal to plant conifer seedlings on 21,300 acres. The decision was endorsed by a Tuolumne County coalition that includes the timber industry, environmental groups and other forest users. It could take effect in August if it is not blocked by Higgins' regional boss.

The plan covers only 8 percent of the 257,314 acres affected by the 2013 blaze, the largest ever recorded in the Sierra Nevada. Much of the land is in Yosemite National Park, where recovery is left to natural processes. Some of it is private timberland already being reforested. And some is in parts of the national forest that did not burn severely, have poor access or are brush or other non-conifer terrain.

The coalition is known as Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions, which works on issues in the national park and forest. It said the plan is a compromise that provides for extensive planting in badly charred areas while leaving most of the land to recover via seed cones that drop from surviving trees.

"YSS supports such middle ground plans," Chairman Chris Trott said in a news release, "and we are eager to help find the funding needed to get trees planted and a new forest growing in the burned landscape."

The fire started Aug. 17, 2013, near the confluence of the Tuolumne and Clavey rivers. Keith Matthew Emerald of Columbia was accused of building an illegal campfire that caused the blaze, but federal prosecutors last May dropped the charges because two key witnesses had died.

Forest staff members had first proposed to replant 30,065 acres but reduced it to 21,300 after a closer look at the conditions on the ground. Higgins kept that acreage in Friday's decision, which can be appealed to Randy Moore, the regional forester in charge of California's national forests. Objections must be made within 45 days and can come only from people who commented earlier.

The plan also calls for thinning 12,769 acres of older plantations within the burn so they could better resist future fires. Another 3,833 acres would be managed mainly for oak, which is prime habitat for deer.

"Reforestation would be focused on areas that are best suited to support a forest and be more resilient when the next fire comes," the decision said. "The Forest Service recognizes that fire will occur here again and setting up a fire-resilient landscape is critical."

Planting could start in 2017 and take three to five years. Most of the work would be done by professional crews, but the Forest Service plans some volunteer projects, too.

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