Union Democrat

By GUY MCCARTHY

FRONT PAGE

Major project planned to reduce fuels in Middle, South Forks Stanislaus watersheds

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Provided /Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions

Typical forest areas northeast oftwain Harte in 2017, where tree mortality caused by the combination of years of drought and bark beetles resulted because forests were so unnaturally dense.

The Stanislaus National Forest was created in February 1897 and federal custodians of the forest and collaborative partners are planning what is billed as the largest green forest management project in the forest's history.

The project will be focused on the Middle and South Forks Stanislaus River watersheds, an area that hasn't had significant fires in a century, said John Buckley with the stakeholders group Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions. The project area covers 117,000 acres, with 92,000 acres on Stanislaus National Forest lands. It stretches from a point between Donnells and Beardsley reservoirs at its upstream end down to Cedar Ridge and Columbia.

A glance at a map of the project area underscores what is at stake if a major fire burns up these sections of the Middle and South Forks Stanislaus River watersheds.

A century of fire suppression has resulted in unnaturally dense stands of trees and thick brush fields up and down the water infrastructure-laden ridges of the Stanislaus Middle and South Forks, from Columbia to Lyons Dam and Pinecrest and beyond. Populated, historic towns of the Highway 108 corridor are all along the edges of the project area. Remote backcountry communities like Jupiter and Mount Knight are within the project area.

A narrow strip of the project area that includes the Pacific Gas and Electric flumes and ditches below Lyons Dam has already had fire threats significantly reduced by the multiagency, multi-year Tuolumne Main Canal Fuels Reduction Project.

The current plan for 117,000 acres in the Middle and South Forks Stanislaus River watersheds is to reduce accumulated fuels and shift forest density from its current overgrown state, and to move toward conditions more in alignment with the forest's natural range of variation, where ecologic processes and adaptive capacity can continue to evolve together, according to a two-page Forest Service briefing paper on the project.

Forest Service researchers say they intend to deploy the best available science, scenario planning, and decision support tools, to help with project direction and effects analysis.

Asked if the existing experimental forest out Crabtree Road represents the best available science, Adam Rich, a wildlife biologist with the Stanislaus National Forest, said, "Yes that is correct. The Stanislaus-tuolumne Experimental Forest near Pinecrest was one of the first areas to receive the Variable Density Treatments, and the SERAL project is incorporating this cutting edge research."

Variable density treatments refer to what you see when you go to the Stanislaus-tuolumne Experimental Forest. The forest is not overcrowded with too many trees competing for scarce water. There are open spaces and spaces with moderate density. The experimental forest is managed by humans but it better reflects what the forest looked like centuries ago before western civilization intruded, according to scientists and historians.

The Stanislaus-tuolumne Experimental Forest covers about 1,500 acres and it was formally created in December 1943. Research in the area has been ongoing since the 1920s. Most recently in the experimental forest, researcher Eric Knapp looked at insect and drought tree mortality in various treatments. He found variable density thinning units had significantly less tree mortality. In addition, spotted owl territories there have been monitored and owls continue to successfully breed and raise young in the experimental forest.

The plan detailing the 117,000-acre project from the U.S. Forest Service in Sonora is expected to be presented by June 30 for a 30-day period of public review and responses. Beyond that there is no timetable for completing the project, though Buckley and others with Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions say the plan is to do the project in phases. There is also no overall dollar estimate for the costs.

Patrick Koepele with the Tuolumne River Trust is chair of Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions and part of the collaborative group's leadership team since the devastating 2013 Rim Fire. Koepele also emphasized the Forest Service plan for the Middle and South Forks Stanislaus River watersheds is following the science of the experimental forest.

“One key point is that for many years the Forest Service had a hard time doing the amount of work that needs to be done, due to a variety of reasons, including insufficient congressional funding and a shift to firefighting and away from forest management,” Koepele said this week in a phone interview.

Maybe they were treating 5,000 to 10,000 acres a year, Koepele said. The current plan, if approved, covers more than 100,000 acres and that's a significant jump in scale for the Stanislaus National Forest.

“They won't go out and do it all in one year in one fell swoop,” Koepele said. “But it lays down an approved plan so that the Forest Service can go out and do more work than they've been able to do before.”

Koepele also emphasized that Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions has been an outfront collaborative group, pushing and working with the Forest Service to do more. It's a diverse group that includes environmentalists, conservationists, loggers, recreational users, Tuolumne County government representatives, and biomass industry representatives.

“We're committed to getting something done that benefits the environment, the economy, and the community,” Koepele said.

Brian Wayland of Sierra Pacific Industries, who is based in Sonora, is co-chair with Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions.

“What SPI wants to see is healthy forests,” Wayland said. “We want to see forests that are managed to their full potential. We would like to see a sustainable flow of forest products to support our sawmills and our loggers and jobs in our local communities.”

Sierra Pacific Industries also supports the overall project for 117,000 acres in the Middle and South Forks Stanislaus River watersheds, and the collaborative effort between the Forest Service and Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions, Weyland said.

“We think this project will greatly reduce fire dangers, improve forest health, and contribute to the local economy,” Wayland said.

There's never been any single project for improving the green forest health of the 1,400-square-mile Stanislaus National Forest of this size and scale, Buckley, with Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center in Twain Harte and Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions, said this week.

Salvage-logging and reforestation efforts in the wake of the Rim Fire that burned up more than 400 square miles of the forest and National Park Service lands in Yosemite are comparable in size and scale, but those projects were fire-recovery efforts, not green forest management initiatives.

The goal for the Middle and South Forks Stanislaus River watersheds project is by February 2022, “we hope to have ap-proval for projects within this 92,000 acres of federal forest that would be sold in portions and phases,” Buckley said.

“Variable density thinning, logging to open areas on the north side of Highway 108, down near Lyons, they'll be selling these projects and doing prescribed burns that they hope will be far more aggressive in getting acres done than they've been able to do with limited staffing and resources,” Buckley said.

Phases of the project will include logging, biomass, prescribed fire, invasive weed control, and planning for what to do when there are small fires, droughts, and infestation that will kill some trees.

“It's a whole new approach,” Buckley said. “Instead of small projects, they're putting all of these into the biggest green forest plan the Stanislaus National Forest has ever considered since the 1890s.”


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