

Forest Service takes major step forward on historically massive Tuolumne County project

- Guy McCarthy Mar 2, 2022

A final environmental impact statement and three draft decisions for a massive project to reduce fire threats in the South Fork and Middle Fork Stanislaus watersheds was released Friday by the U.S. Forest Service, a part of the process that's billed as a major step forward for the largest green forest management project in the 124-year history of the Stanislaus National Forest.

The project is planned on an area that totals 118,808 acres of public and private lands that include 94,823 acres in Forest Service jurisdiction, Katie Wilkinson, a project team leader and environmental coordinator for the Stanislaus National Forest, said Friday in a phone interview.

The big project is named Social and Ecological Resilience Across the Landscape, or SERAL, and it's been born from an ongoing partnership between the federal Forest Service, the collaborative Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions group, and Tuolumne County. Other partners include Sierra Pacific Industries, the Tuolumne River Trust, and the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center in Twain Harte.

It has taken more than two years of planning so far. People who have previously commented on the SERAL project have until April 11 to submit their objections to the FEIS and the draft decisions.

"We are committed to considering the best available science, impacts to resilience, habitats, and to our communities," Jason Kuiken, the Stanislaus National Forest supervisor, said in prepared remarks. "We value your input and have incorporated updates to the environmental impact statement in response to the feedback we received on the Draft EIS."

The YSS group, billed as a diverse group of stakeholders who include loggers and conservationists, has played a key role in developing the project with the Forest Service. More than two years of planning, field studies, wildlife surveys, computer modeling of potential impacts, public meetings, reviews of written public comments, more meetings, and more consideration by the USFS of various alternatives have led up to where the project is now, John Buckley, with YSS and CSERC, said this week.

Now, Buckley said, “the Forest Service is finally poised to approve a huge amount of thinning logging treatments, prescribed burning, biomass removal treatments, the construction of fuel breaks, a range of different treatments to prevent the spread of invasive noxious weeds, and to do associated road improvements within the SERAL project area.”

The project will include numerous prescribed burn treatments; significant thinning logging of medium size and small trees; carefully coordinated removals of excess woody fuels called biomass; and other treatments designed to reduce the chances of a devastating, future megafire, similar the 2015 Butte Fire or the 2013 Rim Fire, in the overgrown Middle Fork and South Fork Stanislaus watersheds.

Patrick Koepele, executive director of the Tuolumne River Trust, has been with the 501(c)(3) nonprofit since July 2000. He contacted The Union Democrat on Friday to express support and enthusiasm for the goals of the massive project.

Recent extreme, large fires that have burned in California, including the 257,314-acre Rim Fire that burned primarily in Tuolumne County over several months eight-and-a-half years ago, clearly demonstrate the need to take action to improve forest health and resilience, Koepele said.

“Forests are overgrown and have an unnaturally high number of small trees that are out of balance and susceptible to extreme fire,” Koepele said. “We need to thin out these overgrown forests and get good fire back on the ground to promote forest

health. Our forests, our community, wildlife, and watersheds depend on a successful project.”

Kuiken has released three different draft decisions, Buckley said. One draft decision allows for 11,271 acres of fuel breaks to be done promptly along the Highway 108 corridor where forest communities are most at risk and where Pinecrest Reservoir and its surrounding recreation area are currently vulnerable to wildfire.

A second draft decision authorizes the majority of the SERAL project treatments, which include 30,000 acres of thinning and biomass removal, 7,400 acres of mastication of brush or non-commercial thickets in order to reduce fire danger, and about 69,000 acres of prescribed fire treatments.

A third draft decision authorizes condition-based project actions. These include (1) herbicide use above and beyond the limited herbicide use that is already planned for 270 acres of invasive noxious weeds that have been mapped and analyzed in the vast project area; (2) condition-based salvage logging of trees that may be killed in the next few years in the project area by drought, bark beetles, disease, or wildfire.

The Forest Service bills the plan as an opportunity for environmentalists, foresters, biomass proponents, and traditional timber industry advocates to work together to confront overgrowth and density in the drought-sickened, beetle-vulnerable Stanislaus National Forest. The goal is to create a patchwork of treated and untreated segments of forest, similar to the Stanislaus-Tuolumne Experimental Forest near Pinecrest.

The Stanislaus-Tuolumne Experimental Forest is one of the first areas to undergo variable density treatments, a strategy that is part of the big new project. Adam Rich, a wildlife biologist with the Stanislaus National Forest, described variable density treatments as “cutting edge research” in June 2020.

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. 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.

Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions stakeholders have been pressing for aggressive forest treatments to reduce wildfire risk and to reduce tree mortality from drought and insects since they formed their group in December 2010, more than three years before the Rim Fire.

The YSS group and Tuolumne County have also gained grants to help get the SERAL project planned, and to put crews to work creating fuel breaks and doing other needed forest treatments in the project area, Buckley said.

“While in many places across the West there are debates between stakeholder interests over exactly which forest treatments to do or where to do treatments, here in Tuolumne County the partnership between the Forest Service, YSS, and Tuolumne County has led to agreement for approving this broadly-supported, giant, large landscape plan,” Buckley said. “Computer modeling by the Forest Service of the proposed treatments shows that once the many years of treatments eventually all get fully implemented, the overall benefits to the forest will greatly improve forest health and lower the risk of high severity wildfires.”

Asked Friday afternoon for timeline and cost estimates to complete the project, Stanislaus National Forest spokesman Benjamin Cossel said the project is “a long-term investment in the health of the forest,” and the Forest Service and its partners expect mechanical thinning will be

completed in about seven years, sooner, if possible, along with prescribed fires.

“We don’t see this as a project with a cast-in-stone end date,” Cossel added, indicating that forest health and maintenance are on-going, ever-evolving responsibilities the Forest Service shares with its partners and society at large.

The project will cost tens of millions of dollars and the funding will come from annual Forest service budgets, and from grants secured by partners, most notably the YSS group, Cossel said. It’s important to note that much of the removed biomass will be sold to timber processors.

The SERAL project area does not include the fire-threatened North and South Groves of 1,100 giant sequoias in the North Fork Stanislaus watershed that straddles Calaveras and Tuolumne counties in Calaveras Big Trees State Park, which is bordered by private lands near Dorrington, private lands owned by SPI and the Save the Redwoods League, Stanislaus National Forest lands, and no-hunting Tuolumne State Game Refuge lands in the Stanislaus National Forest.

Backers of the SERAL project say it’s the largest green forest management to date up and down the entire, 400-mile-long Sierra Nevada range. The Stanislaus National Forest was created by Congress in February 1897. Today it covers 1,403 square miles in Alpine, Calaveras, Tuolumne, and Mariposa counties, including 42% of all the land in Tuolumne County.