

Clear-cutting forests is wrong way for state to lead on climate policy

Deanna Lynn Wulff, Sacramento Bee, 3-10-11

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California trees have changed my life. I first came to know them as a little girl hiking with my family, then as a seasonal waitress in Yosemite, and finally, as a ranger in Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park.

Nowhere else in the world will you find dry, soothing afternoon winds, regular 80-degree days, loamy soft soil, abundant rivers, pristine alpine lakes and big, beautiful trees – sugar pines, firs, cedars, hemlocks, redwoods, sequoias and more. To walk among these giants is to walk into a living cathedral.

Four out of five of the world's tallest tree species live in the Golden State.

I became so enchanted by them that I decided to make my home in the mountains, and my boyfriend and I mapped out a journey to explore the state's forests and nearby towns.

We went all the way to the Warner Range near Alturas, in the far northeastern corner of the state, where we spent a rainy night under a picnic table, trying to stay dry and warm. We were just out of graduate school, we didn't even own a tent, and my car's "check engine" light blinked red for the entire journey.

But that wasn't the problem.

Town after town, forest after forest, I came to understand that clear-cutting is still legal. Like many people, I assumed that the practice had long ago been banned. Sometimes a beauty strip was left near the road, but I'd get out and run past it, right into a burnt swath of earth unlikely to recover for decades.

Upset, I went home, wrote some letters, joined some advocacy groups and swore off paper towels. But I never did go back. Who would?

Today and at last, California is posed to do something grand for its trees and the communities that live near them.

As part of the global warming bill, AB 32, the state has put together a carbon trading system to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Originally, only healthy forests and ecosystems could be counted as carbon credits. (Trees absorb carbon as they grow.) Timber companies, by keeping their forests intact, could trade credit to refineries and other major polluters to help them meet their emission limits.

Companies could profit by keeping their trees standing, and that's a good idea.

So what's the problem? Sierra Pacific Industries, which owns 1.9 million acres of California land, lobbied for changes in the carbon offset program. Specifically, the company pushed for even-age management practices, which is a fancy term for clear-cutting and replanting. It paid \$37,500 to California Strategies, a Sacramento lobbying firm, to present its case and policy adjustments were made.

Yet, clear-cutting works against the goals of the carbon offset program.

"Planting a monoculture (or single species) of tree is an unproductive way to sequester carbon," says Dr.

Malcolm North, a restoration specialist with the U.S. Forest Service. "The best way to store carbon is to mimic a forest's original condition." Monocultures can also be unstable; they are more easily consumed in a fire, and they are more vulnerable to bark beetles and other pathogens.

Mixed-age forests, on the other hand, are resilient, and they support an abundance of plant and animal life, providing homes for birds, bears and squirrels and enriching streams that sustain fish. Salmon, for example, need clean gravel, constant water temperature and pools for spawning, and trees nurture their habitat. Redwood Creek in Muir Woods National Monument is one of the last streams in California with native salmon, due largely to the undisturbed forest.

Selective cutting and care also lends itself to long-term jobs. An expert logger is a well-paid, skilled laborer who could have sustainable work for life – under the right conditions.

Decimating the land, cutting jobs and sending another species to the endangered list is dire for all of us. Yet there is still time to sway the Air Resources Board to choose the right policy.

The Climate Action Reserve, a national offset program that aims to ensure integrity in the U.S. carbon market, is holding a workshop at 1 p.m. today in Sacramento on the state's forest protocols, and is accepting written comments until March 25. Add your input at policy@climateactionreserve.org.