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Timber: Forum in Comptche addresses hack and squirt

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By Adrian Baumann



Jesse Weaver, forest manager at Mendocino Redwood Company, at a public forum in Comptche.



As you drive down Orr Springs Road between Ukiah and Comptche you see huge stands of dead trees. These hundreds of thousands of snags, killed with a practice called “hack-and-squirt,” aren’t particularly scenic. Still, depending on your point of view they might also be nothing more than good forest management practices, or they might be a lurking fire-hazard and evidence of large scale environmental damage.

On March 5, at the Grange hall in Comptche a group of about 120 concerned citizens gathered to discuss the use of hack-and-squirt in the huge swath of timberland owned by Mendocino Redwood Company. The public forum included local residents, representatives of Mendocino

environmental groups and Jesse Weaver, forest manager for MRC in the Navarro and Big River watersheds.

Albion's fire chief and the Elk Water District's manager spoke, and a long line of people voiced their concerns. The Albion Little River Fire District is considering rules that could severely limit hack-and-squirt. Weaver offered limited responses at the meeting, but listened intently. Due to MRC corporate rules, he could not comment to TWN as of press time.

Hack-and-squirt is a forest management practice used across the United States to adjust the kinds of trees growing in a forest. In Mendocino, the clear-cutting of the last century resulted in areas that had formerly been conifer forest, with Douglas Fir and Redwood the dominant species, being succeeded by oak forest, primarily Live Oak and Tan Oak.

Not only are oaks not profitable to lumber companies, state law requires oak forest not replace conifer forest, meaning lumber companies must eliminate oak, allowing conifers to come back. Here the lumber companies have two options, sending workers in to manually cut down the trees, or using hack-and-squirt. MRC is not the only company in the area using hack-and-squirt, and in fact the practice is used to some extent within the Jackson State Demonstration Forest, and is a procedure approved by CalFire as part of the individual timber harvest plans that it approves.

The procedure involves making a cut into the trunk and through the bark with a hatchet. An herbicide, ideally only a few milliliters worth and in the case of MRC usually Imazapyr, is sprayed into the trunk. The process acts like a lethal injection for a tree. Spraying the herbicide past the bark means that the chemical travels through the tree's sap into the roots and branches, quickly killing it. The snag is left standing until it rots and falls, which the lumber companies claim takes about three years, with environmentalists and firefighters worrying it often takes longer.

These stands of dried out trees are of concern to Ted Williams, fire chief for the Albion Little River Fire District. Williams explained that as a firefighter he doesn't take a stance on the environmental impacts of hack-and-squirt, saying, "My concern is we don't want to have residential homes up against a dead forest...it was our assumption that CalFire because they're given the authority to review these timber harvest plans...that somewhere in that process there'd be a study on impact of safety to our community, and to date I haven't really seen anything come out of this process...we're not necessarily against it, but I would like to see it studied."

He said he not only fears the dead trees could result in quick spread of fires, but that the dead trees will present a hazard to his firefighters, who will have to contend with falling branches and fallen trees limiting mobility.

Because the tree is dead throughout it won't send up new shoots, whereas manually cutting down the trees means that shoots can sprout up, requiring workers to repeatedly cut back the new growth, and making hack-and-squirt more cost-effective for lumber companies.

But this fact is also the crux of the opponents' grievance: that hack-and-squirt isn't a better forest management practice, just cheaper for the companies, and that in the long run, locals will foot the bill on potential fall-out from herbicides, increased fire hazard and the decreased property values that result from a view of a dead forest.

The Albion Fire Board is scheduled to consider new rules banning companies from leaving dead trees standing. Though this wouldn't outright ban hack-and-squirt it would make it far more costly, something that several people at the meeting cheered as tipping the economic balance against hack-and-squirt.

Charlie Acker, manager of the Elk and Irish Beach water districts, explained his fear of herbicides contaminating local streams, potentially damaging indigenous plants and fish, as well as potential threats to humans.

Jessica Thompson, a community member, was instrumental in organizing the meeting, the third and largest that's been held on the issue. She explained that the conversation has been brewing for a while but that she recently observed MRC doing hack-and-squirt across the street from her property, as she says, "Right above our well...we just felt like it was time for them to do something to give something back."

While MRC did send Weaver, Thompson says she had limited response from county government, saying "Hopefully, I think the supervisors are starting to respond and agree to meet, and the local fire departments are stewing over how they might help, so we'll see what happens."

But at least one man, George Hollister, stood up to defend MRC, saying "I think if we're concerned about fire danger in Comptche we have to separate fire danger from Mendocino Redwood...and if we don't do that what we're doing is we're going on a witch hunt."

Toward the end of the meeting, a man with a German accent and long dreads stood up. Andreas Dahm explained that back in Europe forest management companies go into the woods and mark the trees they consider undesirable. Local people are then allowed to cut down these trees for firewood, saving both themselves and the companies money.

Weaver asked the crowd if they would be amenable to this kind of solution, and the group gave a resounding affirmative, though not without some murmurs that they wouldn't want to burn the poisoned wood.

Edwin Nieves, director of the Mendocino Environmental Center, summed up the sentiment of many of the participants, who though they couldn't point to a single overwhelming problem were nonetheless bothered by what was happening, saying, "As far as I'm concerned they're bad neighbors."