

Gualala River Watershed's Battle Over Timber Harvest Plan Continues

By Steve Lemig

The Gualala Redwood Timber Company has submitted a new, revised proposal to log a 402-acre plot of land in the lower Gualala River. This comes just weeks after The California Department of Forestry and Wildfire (CAL FIRE) revoked the timber company's previous permit due to its incomplete assessment of the environment impact of the logging operation.

This latest development is part of an ongoing battle to protect the lower Gualala River watershed, which empties into the Pacific Ocean 110 miles north of San Francisco along the Sonoma and Mendocino county line. The area is home to old growth and second growth redwoods, and supports dozens of threatened and endangered species such as steelhead salmon, Coho salmon, the northern spotted owl, and a host of rare native plants.

Hundreds of locals and members of environmental groups, including Friends of Gualala River, Forest Unlimited, and California Native Plant Society, assembled against the initial approval of the Dogwood Timber Harvest Plan in July of 2016. A coalition of environmental groups in the region sued CAL FIRE for its hasty approval of the logging permit without considering its full environmental impact on the area.

On April 18, 2017, the Sonoma County Superior Court ordered CAL FIRE to revoke the Gualala Redwood Timber Company's permit, which included selective logging of 330 acres and more aggressive logging of the remaining 42 acres in the timber harvest plan. The court entered the judgment against CAL FIRE, citing the agency's failure to assess any negative impacts of the logging operation on the century-old floodplain redwood forest. CAL FIRE finally responded in September with a "Notice of Director's Decision Vacating Approval" banning logging in the Dogwood THP area.

To log on private or corporate land, a Registered Professional Forester (RPF) must prepare a document which outlines the proposed logging operations, known as a Timber Harvest Plan (THP), and submit this to the state. The RPFs describe THPs as having two functions: to provide information for the CAL FIRE director to determine if the proposed logging conforms to the rules, and to provide direction to logging operators who carry out the THP. These documents were certified as the "functional equivalent" of an Environmental Impact Report. They are supposed to evaluate all of the potential direct and cumulative impacts that might occur as a result of the logging plan and implement any feasible measures which would reduce this impact to a level of insignificance.

"[The Dogwood THP] decision confirms that CAL FIRE failed yet again to regulate the timber industry and protect the environment," said Larry Hanson,

president of Forest Unlimited. He said CAL FIRE ignored the combined impact of this logging operation and several others in the region, “despite forestry rules specifically designed to protect floodplain forests against cumulative impacts.”

CAL FIRE’s initial approval of the Dogwood THP was especially alarming considering the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency listed the Gualala River watershed as “impaired” in 1998 due to sediment created in large part by logging practices in the region.

Friends of Gualala River reported that for decades the Gualala Redwood Timber Company has ignored the environmental and erosive impact of their practice of clearcutting on steep ridges. In addition, the timber company looks at the Dogwood THP permit revocation as a minor setback and plan to hasten logging most of the floodplain of the lower Gualala River that falls outside the Dogwood THP in the German South THP and Plum THP, which have already been approved by CAL FIRE.

“The real problem isn’t going to go away until the Board of Forestry and CAL FIRE follow their own rules, including CEQA,” said Charlie Ivor, president of Friends of Gualala River on the group’s website. “Until they do, we are not going away either.”

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP? Stay informed! Email Leslie Markham at leslie.markham@fire.ca.gov and request to be put on CAL FIRE’s Timber Harvesting Plan submission notification list.

You can track the list of THP’s submitted on CAL FIRE’s FTP site: <ftp://thp.fire.ca.gov/THPLibrary>.

You can also get a copy of the Forest Practice Rules (Title 14 California Code of Regulations) at: http://www.fire.ca.gov/resource_mgt/downloads/2009_Forest_Practice_Rules_and_Act.pdf.

Steve Lemig is a writer, outdoor athlete, and environmental advocate who spends lots and lots of time outdoors with his family. He is the founder of Wilderdad.com, which educates parents on the importance of raising kids to love and take care of the environment.