Clearcutting

1. What is the problem with clearcutting?

The current logging method "clearcutting" results in the following:

a. Degradation of water in the State Water Project, that is, the network of rivers and aqueducts that routes water from Sierra Nevada forests to the Central Valley and coastal cities.

b. Floods and mudslides downstream from logged sites during the winter and droughts during the summer.

c. Damage to local and state economies, resulting from loss of fishing and agricultural jobs near clearcut forests. High potential for eventual damage to tourism industry.

d. Destruction of wildlife habitats, including those for endangered species.

e. Increased forest fire risk.

2. What are the specific impacts of clearcutting?

a. Degradation of water supplies

i. Eighty percent of the state’s urban water supply originates in forested areas. The water of the State Water Project starts with Sierra Nevada rivers and continues through a series of reservoirs and aqueducts until it reaches urban areas.

Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI) has announced plans to clearcut over one million acres in the Sierra Nevada over several years, and the clearcutting is already well underway. Many of these forested watersheds feed the State Water Project. Over 38,000 acres are near the Oroville Dam Reservoir. If these lands are logged with SPI’s typical process, waterways serving the entire state may face costly sedimentation and pesticide contamination.

ii. Clearcutting on steep slopes and near streams causes severe erosion of silt and leaching of toxic herbicides into streams that provide water supplies. East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) already has sediment in its reservoirs due to the logging along the Mokelumne River in the Sierra Nevada.

iii. Every stream in the northern part of the state has been declared impaired under the Clean Water Act by the EPA because of irresponsible logging practices.

iv. State Senate Select Committee on Forestry verified that current forestry regulations fail to limit the amount of clearcutting within a watershed and fail to include any protections for sensitive watersheds.

b. Major floods and mudslides
i. In January 1997, much of Stafford, California was destroyed by a mudslide from a clearcut area above the town. Courts ordered Maxxam Corporation’s Pacific Lumber Company to pay $3.3 million in damages.

ii. Increased frequency and severity of flooding downstream of clearcuts. For example, third-generation apple farmer Kristy Wrigley has experienced a tenfold increase in flooding of her fields.

c. Damage to local and state economies, through the loss of jobs and reduction of property values near clearcut forests

i. The Salmon fishing industry was wiped out in northern California with loss of 35,000 jobs.

ii. In rural California counties, tourism provides 10 to 25 times as many jobs as logging. Massive clearcutting will severely impact tourism jobs.

d. Destruction of wildlife habitats, including endangered species’ habitats

i. Coho salmon populations in the North California Coast area are one percent of 1950 levels, primarily because logging-related erosion has buried gravels necessary for spawning, has blocked migration to spawning areas, and has removed trees that shaded the water, keeping it cool enough for salmon.

ii. The industrial logging process in use in California removes all vegetation with herbicides, leaving absolutely no habitat.

iii. Some endangered species, such as the spotted owl and marbled murrelet, can survive only in old growth forests.

e. Increased forest fire risk

i. Clearcut areas are replanted with same-age, same-species tree plantations, which are more susceptible to disease, and facilitate the rapid spread of tree-crown fires through the forest because they are all the same age and height. Large ancient trees are much more fire resistant than plantation trees and slow the spread of fire.

3. What is clearcutting?

Clear cutting is the removal of all, or almost all, trees. As practiced by Sierra Pacific Industries, it involves:

• applying herbicides to kill all vegetation other than trees,

• removing all, or nearly all trees,
• burning the remaining stumps and vegetation,
• using herbicides to prevent any plants from returning, and finally
• planting rows of seedlings, often pine.

This process transforms a diversified forest ecosystem into a plantation of same-age, same-species trees, with no other vegetation and drastically reduced wildlife habitat.

4. Why has clearcutting become more prevalent?

The Sierra Club prefers the use of selective logging techniques, where timber companies choose some trees to be logged and leave the oldest and healthiest trees in the forest. Community based companies such as the original Pacific Lumber used such techniques. Unfortunately, clearcutting (the removal of all trees) has been practiced since the 1950’s. However, in the last decade there has been an unprecedented increase in California by Maxxam’s Pacific Lumber in Humboldt County and by Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI) in the Sierra Nevada. When these two companies incurred large debt load, they began to rapidly liquidate their trees to pay their creditors. Since 1994, clearcutting in California has increased by 225 percent, and in the Sierra Nevada it has increased by 2,500 percent. SPI owns three-fourths of the industrial timberland in the Sierra Nevada and has announced plans to clearcut one million acres in the next few years. They have already made a strong start toward this goal.

5. Who wins and who loses with clearcutting?

The state must balance the competing rights of property and livelihoods of individuals and industries. It must also balance the property owners’ rights against the public’s right to have the public trust resources of water, fish and wildlife sustained. In this complex network of competing rights, some players are favored over others.

The wood and paper products harvested from our forests are taken at a cost to our public trust resources. Some of these costs are paid now in the form of taxes to remove sediment from our water or to cover the government’s administration of logging. Other costs will be born by future generations as extinct plant and animal species, deteriorated rivers and riparian zone, loss of wilderness recreation areas, lost forests, and increased global warming. No public forum is debating whether the products are worth the loss of public trust resources. The products are often wasteful, such as the 48% of the hardwood that is used for shipping pallets that end up in landfills, or could be produced without cutting down trees, such as paper made from recycled paper or fibrous vegetable material like hemp. Sometimes cutting down new trees is the only good answer to a need. However, the decision needs to be well-reasoned, not from habit.