

Commentary in the Fresno Bee, Sunday, Jan. 24, 2021:

From ashes of Creek Fire comes a citizens group appealing for sensible forest management

By Robert Longatti

Despite the terrible forest fires the West, particularly California and Oregon, suffered this past year, several environmentalists' groups have filed a notice of intent to sue the U.S government to block approximately 11,000 miles of fuel breaks. They contend this would violate the Endangered Species Act in what they call a misguided effort to slow the advance of wildfires in six Western states.

They say the fuel breaks, in conjunction with proposed widespread clear-cutting, herbicide spraying, grazing and prescribed fire could threaten the survival of more than 100 rare wildlife species across potentially more than 340,000 square miles of federal land. The groups involved in the suit are the Center for Biological Diversity in Nevada, Sierra Club, Western Watersheds Project, and Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

These groups fail to accept well recognized and scientifically documented evidence that the Western forests are unhealthy, overly dense and carry a huge fuel load. Continuous fire suppression has allowed the fuel load to grow. Allowing dead stands to remain increases the lower story fuel load over time. Negative reaction to thinning and prescribed burns have prevented the Forest Service from treating nearly enough acreage. Given the situation, it is imperative that fuel breaks be made now and not delayed with legal action.

The Forest Service must contend with masses of paperwork often under the threat of legal action. Much of this can be traced back to NEPA (National Environmental Protection Act) and ESA (Endangered Species Act), which environmental groups continue to use to suppress sensible forest management. The Forest Service estimates that for every 1,000 acres of land they plan to treat, they have to create 500 pages of supporting material, with successful projects taking years. Vicki Christiansen, the head of the Forest Service, estimates there are a billion acres of forest land at risk in the US, with 80 million acres belonging to the Forest Service.

If these groups genuinely wanted to protect species, their actions over the years have failed miserably. The destruction of animals just in the Creek Fire alone was tragic. According to a January article in Bloomberg Law, California's 2020 wildfire season thwarted the state's fight against climate change, spewing enough carbon dioxide into the air equal the emissions of 24 million passenger vehicles driving over the course of a year.

I fail to understand how anyone who suffered from the poor air quality, was saddened by the number of animals killed and their habitat destroyed can continue to support these lawsuits. The reality, though, is the Sierra Club and their counterparts are so powerful that change will only come from within their memberships.

During the Creek Fire, a nonpartisan, grass-roots organization was formed to build a vast community of citizens to encourage common ground between environmentalists, the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management as well the state and individual landowners. The nonpartisan group, Citizens for Sensible Forest Management, has a website, (<http://csfm.net>), and a change.org petition, (<https://www.change.org/ForestManagement>) that I encourage people, especially members of the above organizations, to visit.

Wildlife, our children's health and future, as well as the economic survival of mountain communities, are dependent on each of us taking a stand. How will we explain to our children and grandchildren our inaction today was the reason they could not enjoy the beauty and restoring power of healthy forests that were once ours?

Robert Longatti is a fourth-generation resident of Madera County who lives in O'Neals. He was a banker in Fresno before he retired.