

## Feds' plan for Rim fire timber walks fine line between loggers, environmentalists

By SCOTT SMITH



FILE - In this Sept. 25, 2013 file photo, Scott Small, and other National Forest Service crew members work to restore terrain that was bulldozed for a firebreak in the battle against Rim Fire on a nordic ski trail along Dodge Ridge in the Stanislaus National Forest, near Tuolumne City, Calif. The Forest Service says it will release a final decision Wednesday, Aug. 27, 2014, on how much timber to log from the Sierra Nevada's largest wildfire in recorded history. Last year's Rim Fire burned 400 square miles including parts of Yosemite. A debate has since raged about sending burned and dead trees to lumber mills or leave them and let nature take its course.

RICH PEDRONCELLI, FILE — AP Photo

FRESNO, Calif. — U.S. Forest Service officials say they tried to balance competing interests in a plan released Wednesday that allows loggers to remove trees killed in a massive central California wildfire last year, but environmentalists called it a travesty and threaten to sue.

The highly awaited decision will allow logging on 52 square miles of forests blackened in the Rim Fire, which burned 400 square miles of the Stanislaus National Forest, Yosemite National Park's backcountry and private timber land.

It came amid a standoff between environmentalists and supporters of the timber industry over what to do with the trees that died in the fire. The blaze also destroyed 11 homes and cost more than \$125 million to fight.

Susan Skalski, supervisor of the Stanislaus National Forest, said that she tried to balance the need to reduce future fires with protecting the environment and wildlife. She took into consideration input from the public, environmental groups and the timber industry and said it was impossible for her to devise a perfect recovery plan.

"I did my best to balance all these important goals, with the intent of providing a decision that best serves the public interest," she said. "I realize that my decision will not please every member of the public."

Under the proposal, about 24 square miles of the burned mountain range will be logged, as well as an additional 28 square miles along roads where trees threaten to fall and hurt people.

Environmentalists argued against logging the land, saying the blackened trees and new growth beneath them create vital habitat for dwindling birds such as spotted owls and black-backed woodpeckers.

"This is an ecological travesty," said Chad Hanson, a forest ecologist and founder of the John Muir Project, an environmentalist group. "It's basically an extinction plan for the California spotted owl."

Hanson said he is considering challenging the suit in court and has no choice but to file a federal petition seeking to list the spotted owl as endangered or threatened.

David Bischel, president of the California Forestry Association, which represents the timber industry, praised the plan.

He said it will pay for replanting and restoring the forest. Taking out dead trees will also allow the public to use the land and eliminate a new fire hazard caused by the falling trees, logging supporters said.

Rep. Tom McClintock, a Republican who represents the region, said he fears Forest Service officials took too long to form a recovery roadmap. The dead trees on public land in the last year have deteriorated, while those on privately held land have been mostly cut down and sent to the mills.

"They've taken so much time I'd be surprised they get any bids at all," McClintock said. "If they did, it's a fraction of the acreage that could have been salvaged."

Skalski is expected to sign the logging decision Thursday, making it final.

Federal prosecutors accuse bow hunter Keith Matthew Emerald, 32, of starting the fire Aug. 17, 2013, when he lost control of an illegal campfire and had to be rescued by helicopter. A grand jury on Aug. 7 returned a four-count indictment against Emerald, who lives in the foothill community of Columbia.

Emerald, who has pleaded not guilty, was released from jail after posting a \$60,000 bond.

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