

■ *Salvage sale*

# Trees cut may not have been dying after all

By SCOTT SONNER  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As controversy raged last fall over the salvage logging of dead and dying trees in national forests, a bug expert in Idaho warned her bosses at the Forest Service about an emerging problem:

The trees aren't dying as fast as they should.

Contrary to earlier assessments of damage from fire and bark beetle attacks, test plots of a few hundred trees — left behind during a salvage operation on the Payette National Forest — were still alive two years after the fire and more than a year after 10,000 acres of neighboring stands had been logged.

"Currently, our biggest errors are associated with trees living which have been expected to die from our selection guidelines," Forest Service entomologist Julie Weatherby wrote to her supervisor.

"Hopefully some of these green grand firs and Douglas firs ... will die over time," she wrote in the Sept. 15 memo obtained by The Associated Press.

Usually it's trees that ARE dying that cause concern.

But in this case, a politically charged fight over the logging of the diseased and bug-infested trees had changed the rules of the game.

Congress spent more than a year gathering testimony from scientists, environmentalists and timber-industry experts about the wisdom and necessity of salvage logging.

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Backers said it was necessary to ease fire risks and recover dying timber before it lost its market value. Critics said it was a scam intended to harvest healthy, green trees under the guise of salvage operations free from the usual environmental restraints.

In what Vice President Al Gore later called the biggest mistake of the Clinton administration's first term, President Clinton signed the so-called "salvage timber rider" into law in 1995. The measure waived the usual fish and wildlife protections to expedite harvests through the end of 1996 in an effort to clear out fuel loads that contribute to catastrophic fires.

Environmentalists dubbed it "logging without laws" and accused the Forest Service of cutting tens of thousands of acres of healthy trees. Clinton later said he'd been tricked and didn't really support the program.

Environmentalists across the country went to court last year to try to block the salvage timber sales, but had little success due to the broad definition of what constitutes dead or dying trees.

At the Payette National Forest last July, two lawyers for the activist group Idaho Sporting Congress were arrested and their film temporarily confiscated when they took pictures to support claims they made in a lawsuit that sought to halt salvage timber sales near the Salmon River.

Meanwhile, University of Idaho professor Arthur Partridge was testifying on Capitol Hill that the overall forest health crisis was a hoax.

There has been virtually no change in tree mortality nationwide over the past 30 years, said Partridge, a professor of forest disease and insect problems.

He said he had examined trees marked for

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salvage sales in the French Creek area of the Payette National Forest and found them to be green and healthy.

Insects are constantly attacking trees, but that only causes death under certain conditions, Partridge said.

"Insects and disease are all parts of a functional ecosystem, just as they are in the human population," he wrote in an op-ed piece published by the Idaho Statesman on Aug. 12, 1996.

"Using the presence of these phenomena as an excuse to log is akin to using the presence of athlete's foot as an excuse to execute the athlete."

The Forest Service insisted the Payette trees at issue were dead.

In a July 23, 1996, news release, the agency said that "people may see what appears to be green, healthy trees removed from the forest.

"These trees are actually dead, the result of bark beetle attacks," the agency said.

Ron Hamilton, resource and ecology branch chief for the Payette, said 1994 wild fires had damaged the tree roots, "leaving them stressed and highly vulnerable to beetle attacks."

Weatherby was quoted in the news release saying that the green foliage hadn't faded yet because the bug attacks were too recent.

"The chlorophyll needs time to leave the needles so the green color won't fade until late this summer or early next summer," she said.

Now, agency officials concede the environmentalists may have had a point. The trees seem to be doing better than the Forest Service thought they would.

"So far, that general statement is probably true," Weatherby said in a mid-August telephone interview.

Forest Service officials headed back into the woods the week of Aug. 18 to begin this year's assessment of the test plots, part of a five-year study.

Weatherby reported in her preliminary review of the plots last

Sept. 12 that 119 of 177 Douglas firs and 79 of 117 grand firs on the test plots were still alive.

"Most of the trees expected to die as a result of root collar damage are still alive," she wrote last fall, describing damage where the trunk of the tree meets the ground.

Among the Douglas firs, "52 trees which should have died are still alive as of August 1996," Weatherby wrote.

Among the grand firs, "58 trees lived which should have died and one tree died which should have lived," she said, which meant half the trees had been misclassified.

"Hopefully this accuracy will improve over time as more trees die," she said.

Environmentalists say Weatherby's report shows the Forest Service lied about the trees' condition to allow their harvest under the salvage rider.

"The trees they predicted would die, did not die. Two-thirds of them are still alive," said Ron Mitchell, director of the Idaho Sporting Congress in Boise.

"They repeatedly, blatantly lied to us," he said.

Mitchell says environmentalists repeatedly requested the results of Weatherby's preliminary assessment and agency officials denied its existence until conservation groups acquired her report in June through the Freedom of Information Act.

Weatherby said it's too early to

say whether the trees will live. She and Hamilton said the five-year study is intended to help improve Forest Service's future ability to determine whether a tree is going to live or die after a fire.

"Trees don't die necessarily within the first year of a fire, especially those trees that are stressed and attacked by bark beetles," she said.

Hamilton defends the decision to log the area. He conceded some live trees may have been cut, but said there are new indications that beetles are invading more of the trees, killing many of them.

"Like a lot of things, 20-20 hindsight is really quite good. We had to make the calls on our salvage sale based on our best information at the time," Hamilton said in a recent telephone interview.

To determine the prognosis for a tree, biologists and foresters measure the portion of the tree's crown that is dead, assess fire damage at the root collar, drill for core samples and examine scarring of the cambium - the thin skin between the outer bark and the wood where new wood grows.

Weatherby said the Payette study is examining the premise that hot ground fires can cook trees' surface roots and cause more damage than is evident by simply looking at the crown.