



Native conifers, shrubs and grasses cling to a south-facing slope of the Siskiyou Crest Mountain Range, a fire-adapted ecosystem near the Pacific Crest Trail close to the California border with Oregon. Photo courtesy of Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center

## [CALIFORNIA FORUM](#)

# Logging in Klamath National Forest won't stop wildfires. Let it recover naturally

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Just south of the Oregon border, pink rosettes of lewisia bloom among rocky outcrops. Clumps of fire-adapted Baker cypress cluster along steep slopes.

These rare species are among the 300 native plants growing in the [Cook and Green botanical area](#) on the Klamath National Forest. Perched on the Siskiyou Crest northeast of Happy Camp, this hotspot of biodiversity is part of a vast mature forest that stretches south into the Trinity Alps and north through Oregon into Washington.

It has been protected since 1994 as part of a visionary blueprint for restoring the region's badly overcut forests. [The Northwest Forest Plan](#), crafted by President Bill Clinton, is designed to guide management of 24 million acres of land in three states, including California's Klamath Forest. Hailed as a global model for protecting large ecosystems and conserving biodiversity, it sets aside 7.4 million acres of federal land to protect old-growth forests and the habitat they provide for species such as the northern spotted owl.

The scientists who designed it intentionally enlarged these reserves to allow for fire and the natural recovery process. Forests older than 80 years are protected from logging unless it will help create old-growth forest conditions.

On August 14 of last year, a series of lightning storms sparked fires throughout southern Oregon, burning hot here, cooler elsewhere before crossing into California. On September 2 flames reached the Siskiyou Crest, quickly becoming intense as they moved into the old-growth stands in the headwaters of Seiad and Horse creeks, both tributaries to the Klamath River. This was the sort of natural disturbance the scientists had planned for.

In response to the nearly 40,000 acres in Oregon affected by the [Miller complex fire](#), the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest plans to log burned trees along roads that pose hazards to public safety. That's it – a response that jibes with the Northwest Plan.

In contrast, [Klamath Forest officials plan](#) to log 7,447 acres of the 10,000 acres burned in Seiad and Horse valleys. Another 166 acres will be logged inside the Cook and Green botanical area.

Some of these sites are within spitting distance of the Pacific Crest Trail; some border wilderness areas. After logging, the plan is to burn, then replant with rows of seedlings. The entire project is within the old-growth reserves designated for protections in the Northwest Forest Plan.

The goal of the Seiad-Horse project is “to prepare the post-fire landscape to accept fire in the future,” Klamath Forest Supervisor Patricia Grantham told me. Logging, burning and planting are the fastest way to reestablish the old-growth forests “lost” to wildfire, she said.

Where Grantham sees progress toward fire-resilient landscapes, others see disaster. Logging large burned trees in old-growth stands does not contribute to their recovery.

“In fact, the only activity more antithetical to the recovery process would be removal of surviving green trees from burned sites,” said [Jerry Franklin, a forester, scientist and University of Washington professor](#), in comments to a previous Klamath Forest post-fire logging project.

The plan to log along 41 miles of roads, and build eight new roads, will create landslides and increase sediment in streams already above the thresholds healthy for fish. “This is a fish killer,” said George Sexton, conservation director for [Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center](#), an environmental organization. “I wouldn’t think any of this is even close to legal.”

These are more than philosophical differences of opinion. While Klamath officials can cite a management authority for each of their proposed actions, the overall project ignores the growing body of scientific literature that finds salvage logging to be ecologically destructive, removing large standing burned trees a detriment to dependant species, and seedling plantations little more than fuel sources waiting for ignitions.

The Klamath project pits current science against a well-intentioned belief that removing forest fuels will fire-proof the landscape and somehow rebuild a fire-resilient old-growth stand. It’s an approach out-of-step with a warmer, drier climate, where fires are increasingly [driven by weather, not fuels](#). “I’m a traditionalist,” said Grantham, who is genuinely proud of the Seiad-Horse project.

This globally significant center of biodiversity deserves more careful consideration than the [environmental assessment poised for adoption](#). Klamath officials should respond to the widespread misgivings over its salvage logging plan with a complete environmental impact statement fully vetted by scientists within and beyond the U.S. Forest Service. They should rethink the future of these venerable old-growth forests – for the public, for Baker cypress, for pink lewisia.

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