Charred trees being extracted from Angora burn area

By Kathryn Reed

Alien-like machines seem to be able to perform superhuman tasks in the middle of the forest.

Cut, extract, de-limb, slice. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

The sound of trees crashing echoes through the otherwise tranquil Angora burn area. A few birds chirp, but no people are venturing in to see what the noise is all about.

Trees are being removed from the Angora burn area. Photos/Kathryn Reed

What's going on is the U.S. Forest Service is getting rid of a significant number of trees charred and killed in the June 2007 wildland fire that destroyed 254 houses and blackened more than 3,000 acres.

The project was delayed because of the lawsuit brought by Earth Island Institute's John Muir Project and the Center for Biological Diversity. The conservation groups believed

woodpeckers' habitat was threatened. The court said we don't think so.

One-by-one the burned standing lumber left behind by the Angora Fire is being removed. About 750 acres are being treated with mechanical equipment, while hand crews are tending to an additional 450 acres.

This project on the South Shore will be the first test case involving another lawsuit.

On June 30, El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Steve Bailey sided with conservation groups Sierra Club and Sierra Forest Legacy by saying the permitting process for this and other projects is out of whack.

Post-Angora the bi-state fire commission put together by the governors of California and Nevada at the time said permits for fuels reduction projects should be streamlined. Local agencies complied by having the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency take on the responsibility.

But the June court decision brings the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Board back into the picture.

Harold Singer, executive director of Lahontan, spoke to leaders of the Lake Tahoe Basin fire community on Aug. 4 telling them what the ruling means.

"They said go back and evaluate all of the projects in the 10-year strategy," Singer said of the court ruling.

This means the Angora project needs a timber waiver. The deadline to secure it is Aug. 13 – same goes for all operations currently under way. Any projects starting after that date require a timber waiver, too. The application for Angora was submitted Thursday while Singer was meeting in Meyers with the basin fire chiefs and others.

"We are committed to expediting the applications, especially

if something is going on. We don’t want to stop work,” Singer said.

Singer said no fee would be associated with the permit. Several tiers are associated with the permitting process. Hand crew jobs will fly through, while something like the Angora work that entails machines and the creation of new trails is at the strictest review process.

While Singer admitted the rest of this work season could be hectic for those needing permits from Lahontan, he said he wants to come up with a more permanent plan for the future. However, he has not contacted the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency to work on what that might look like. Considering TRPA has been the lead permitting agency for such projects in the last few years, it will need to be consulted.

In many ways, the court ruling puts basin fuel reduction permitting rules back to pre-Angora standards.

With the work in the Angora area being a multi-year project, the permit to proceed is crucial.

Crews are currently accessing the area off Forest Mountain Road; working about 400 feet from houses. The plan eventually is to make this a trail that will connect to Seneca Pond, Miwok and the gun mount at the base of Echo Summit.

Less than a half-mile in is the landing area where the chipper will be brought in to shred the trees being felled.

“The goal is to leave less than 10 to 15 tons per acre on the ground,” Duncan Leao, U.S. Forest Service forester said while taking *Lake Tahoe News* on a tour of the area this week. “We could remove 40 to 60 tons per acre to get to the desired level. This part of the prescription is retaining larger snags and larger downed logs. It’s a balance with fuel loading targets and habitat benefits.”

A minimum of four snags and seven downed logs are being left in each acre.

This wood has no value to a mill. Some might be able to be turned into firewood, but most will be chipped and hauled out of the basin. Where it goes is still up in the air.

CTL Forest Management is doing the work.

Trees in this area that are up to 24-inches in diameter will be felled.

“Not every tree, but we will look at all of them,” Leao said.

Each section of the burn area has a particular prescription. There are 16 units, with subunits in some of those. Criteria for how each section is handled include, but is not limited to, the health, size, crown and relation to other trees, species, slope of hill, intensity of burn area, and location. The entire ecosystem was looked out before a plan was devised.

Leao has noticed more deer in the area since the fire. Before not much habitat existed for them to forage. Not so now. Lots of green exists at ground level.

More mountain elderberry is sprouting as well.

In most cases a white fir would be removed over a Jeffery pine or incense cedar.

The prescription for the area also includes where to plant seedlings and where to increase aspen stands.

Several young pines that were planted in the last three years are sprouting in the forest. Their tender green branches protrude beyond the ever-present white thorn and Manzanita.

Part of the healthy forest plan is to get rid of invasive weeds. This is done before the mechanical crews come in and will be performed in areas not having timber removed. It’s all

hand work. Bull thistle and cheat grass are two of the species being removed.

The burn piles dotting the landscape could be burned this fall if conditions allow for it.

As the project progresses, assuming the timber waiver is secured, that area of the forest being worked on will be off-limits to the public for safety reasons. The whole project could take six years – which includes building trails. The goal is to thin 700 acres by Oct. 15.

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