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## Forest plan hinders multiple use

Federal officials claim litigation stifles progress

[Alex Breidler](#)

Record Searchlight

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Meager timber harvests. Rampant fire danger. Mountains of paperwork for overburdened employees.

The 9-year-old Northwest Forest Plan was intended to draw the finest possible balance between forestry on one hand, and the preservation of sensitive species on the other.

Instead, forest leaders said Friday, the plan has been "overcome" by a mess of litigation, a reduction in the amount of land that can be logged, and by lengthy species studies that slow the process down to a crawl.



[Jack Ward Thomas](#)



[Jack Blackwell](#)

Friday marked the final day of a weeklong review in Redding. U.S. Forest Service Regional Forester Jack Blackwell, whose Vallejo office oversees 18 forests in California, met with the leaders of the four Northern California forests that fall under the plan.

Blackwell and former U.S. Forest Service chief Jack Ward Thomas also toured north state forests to see in person how the plan has — or hasn't — worked.

They summarized their findings Friday during a public meeting at the Holiday Inn on Hilltop Drive.

"We have been so careful and so certain we would not cause damage (to the environment) that simply it overwhelmed the promises to people," Thomas told about 50 Forest Service employees. "We need to face up to the fact that we've been overcome by events."

Northern California's forests— Shasta-Trinity, Klamath, Six Rivers and Mendocino — make up about one-third of the land covered under President Clinton's 1994 plan.

That plan reduced logging to protect habitat for Northern spotted owl in old-growth forests. It was meant to be a compromise between timber needs and the environment.

But in past years logging has fallen more steeply than anticipated.

On average, the four forests each year have reaped just 70 percent of their planned timber harvests, Blackwell said. Heavy harvesting on private lands has made it more environmentally risky to log on adjacent forest lands, he said.

Meanwhile, American Indian tribes hoping to conduct small burns to protect their communities have been unable to do so.

"We're so . . . stuck in the process that we can't even do that," Blackwell said. "The Northwest Forest Plan in Northern California is not the Northwest Forest Plan that was written. The promises have not been met."

Under the plan, large sections of Forest Service land were set aside in reserve zones that can be logged only in certain circumstances. Whatever land remained — about 1.26 million acres termed "the matrix" — was where

most scheduled timber harvests have taken place.

Problem is, legal challenges and newer restrictions on roadless areas have caused the matrix to shrink. Only 8 percent to 10 percent of north state matrix land has been used for timber production.

All this ultimately hurts small towns that have traditionally depended on logging dollars.

Forest fuels have built up, particularly in areas set aside for spotted owl habitat, Blackwell said. Those areas must be thinned, "or they're in great danger of burning up," he said.

Of 546,000 acres of owl habitat proposed for thinning, only about 3 percent has seen that work completed.

The problem is equally serious on land zones set aside for experimental management tests. In one such zone near Hayfork, there's been "great frustration" over a lack of vegetation removal and the potential that small towns in the area could be threatened by fire, Blackwell said.

"I have a real, terrible concern whether we're taking care of the land," said Thomas, the former Forest Service chief.

Costs, meanwhile, are excessively high, Blackwell said. Surveys for sensitive species as required under the forest plan have topped out at \$115 per acre. Appeals, litigation and consultation with other agencies on species needs have added to the costs and the paperwork.

"All these bells and whistles were added to the Northwest Forest Plan without any consideration of how much they would increase costs," Thomas said. And, employees said, there is a blow as well to their morale when they feel their wheels are spinning.

For all the plan's problems, some things have gone well, Blackwell said.

Forest workers have found a way to work together more closely, and relationships with American Indian tribes are better since the plan was approved. Habitat for the spotted owl has improved, too.

Still, environmentalists are wary at the thought of the plan being tampered with. The Sierra Club calls the plan a "creative solution" that has slowed the rate of loss of old-growth trees.

Thomas counters that today's Northwest Forest Plan is not the one that was written nearly a decade ago. It morphed, he said, after politicians modified the original plan to increase safeguards for salmon and trees.

Blackwell said the review in Redding would lead to the creation of an action plan for how to better administer the original forest plan.

"I want it to be done in the open," he told the group. "And I want it to be a result of we've seen this week."

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