THE SESPE WILD

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee
P.O. Box 715, Ojai, CA 93024
(805) 921-0618

ACT NOW TO SAVE 15,000 PINE MOUNTAIN CONIFERS!

March 2020

Los Padres National Forest (LPNF) administrators are requesting public comments on their current proposal to thin out stands of ancient conifers – bigcone Douglas fir, sugar pine, white fir and Jeffrey pine – along Pine Mountain Rd.

This road heads east from the summit of Hwy. 33 north of Ojai, and ends just shy of Reyes Peak, which reaches 7,494 feet in height, the highest point on the rim of Sespe Creek's watershed.

Los Padres Forest's plan is to:

(1) create a mowed-to-the-ground fuel-break cut through the chapparal along the first segment of Pine Mountain Road, along a thin strip following the road till about two miles in, a total area of 316 acres (that's one-half of a square mile), and

(2) thin out up to 24" diameter conifer trees at elevations above the chapparal zone in an area of 423 acres (0.7 square miles) from there on east to the road's end below Reyes Peak. Total trees to be removed - 15,228.

THE CONIFER REMOVAL DETAILS

This 0.7 square miles is classified by LPNF planners as "Fire Regime Group 1" - defined as burning every 35 years or less, at low/mixed severity. **THIS IS IMPORTANT! The above is completely wrong, but used as an argument for the proposed tree thinning. See below.)**

LPNF's Project Proposal says "there is a need to reduce surface and ladder fuels, reduce potential fire intensities and make the area more resilient to wildfire" (page 15).

Los Padres staff stated on a recent public call-in Q & A session that they plan only to cut down trees over 24" in diameter at chest-height, if they are adjacent to a road or campsite, or in a hazardous condition.

Conifers from 12" to 24" across will be reduced from 44 per acre to only 8 (page 19). **Multiply 36 trees cut/acre by the 423 acre area of conifers (page 4) comes to 15,228 pine trees recommended for harvest.**

There also is no discussion that these 24" trees may be centuries old (see below).

SKY ISLANDS - WHAT LOS PADRES FOREST IS NOT TELLING US

Sam Sweet is Professor of Evolutionary Biology at the Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Marine Biology at UC Santa Barbara.

He is the scientist whose studies led to the listing of the arroyo toad as a federal endangered species (many live in Sespe Creek.)

He has rsearched the sky islands - meaning the relict ridge-top stands of ancient conifer forests that cling to the tallest peaks in Los Padres Forest – around Reyes Peak, and has lectured on the topic locally. His January 2018 presentation is titled "Big Fires."

He and his student Ella Bendick-Chartier "spent two days examining cut logs, counting rings and looking for fire scars on about 40 trunks up to 30" diameter, from the first pine stands on the west, and out to about 1/2 mile east of Reyes Peak. This was about 3 years ago. None of the trees we counted had fewer than 300 rings, (some were) up to 740, and there are a number of standing trees out there that are a lot larger in diameter than any we found as logs. **NOT ONE SINGLE cut stem we examined had any fire scarring!**

You can find (and I photographed) trees hit by lightning that burned for a while but lived, but there is no indication that any of these lightning-caused fires spread over more than a fraction of an acre.

Photo courtesy of Professor Sam Sweet, from his 2018 presentation, entitled “Big Fires.”

All the generations of dead logs piled on top of each other are absolute proof that there have been no extensive fires up there (for centuries).

My guess is that lightning starts happen either when there is snow on the ground, or enough rain that nothing goes very far. I have made over a dozen trips out there in the past 3-4 years looking for signs of fire and finding basically none.

There is excellent regeneration of all the conifer species out there, and "fuel reduction" would be ecologically criminal, given that there is almost no regeneration on any of the (other Los Padres Forest sky island) peaks burned in the last fifteen years.

Canopy matters, the mountains have become too low in the present (hot) climate for seedling pines, spruce, cedars, etc., to survive without (older) nurse trees.” (personal communication from Sam Sweet, June 6th. 2020)

In all, Sam Sweet has calculated that there are over seven square miles of conifer forest that have not burned for 700 years, on the north-facing slope of Pine Mountain and Reyes Peak.

Contrast that with the unfortunate fate of Los Padres Forest’s other conifer Sky Islands. Around 50% of these ridgeline conifer forests have been lost, in only the past decade’s hotter and windier fires, according to Sam Sweet’s research.

Which means that the conifer trees currently under threat of removal near Reyes Peak by Los Padres Forest’s contractors, for the purpose of fire protection, are growing healthily in an area that has seen NO FIRE for as much as seven centuries.

And the 15,228 pine trees up to 24” diameter, which are at risk from removal under this LPNF thinning project, may be many centuries old.

LPNF planners state in their Project Proposal that they are assuming that these (up to 24”) trees have grown up from young trees since the 1930’s.

But Sam Sweet’s tree ring analysis of 40 fallen pine trees up to 30” in diameter found that they were all between 300 and 740 years old.

Which would place the pines targeted for thinning (up to 24”) likely all many centuries old.

ANY PINE TREE THINNING NEAR REYES PEAK MUST BE PRECEDED BY A THOROUGH ANALYSIS OF THE REAL AGE OF THESE TREES.

What is more, the protection of all of these conifer trees is vital, since half of this sky island landscape has recently been lost across the southern parts of Los Padres Forest. And global heating, regardless of our deadly recent fires, only adds another layer of threat to their long term survival.

Photo: Sam Sweet. Many generations of fallen pine trees lay jumbled on the ground, all over the landscape near Reyes Peak. These would have readily burned up, had these pine forest slopes seen fires in recent centuries.

PLEASE SUBMIT COMMENTS ON LPNF'S TREE THINNING PROPOSAL FOR REYES PEAK/PINE MOUNTAIN - DEADLINE JUNE 30th -

We must ask you, in order to preserve these ancient conifer forest landscapes from the removal of 15,228 large pine trees, to submit comments including the points you feel strongest about, in your own words.

Please do not just cut and paste these comment suggestions!

(1) Ask that these high elevation pine forests near Reyes Peak must all be protected from removal. 15,228 pines are set to be removed.

(2) Say that you support the removal of lower branches up to ten feet from the ground. (This helps prevent ground fires from reaching the crowns, or the tops, of trees.)

(3) Stress the tree ring evidence from UCSB Professor Sam Sweet, that shows no sign of fires near Reyes Peak for at least 700 years. The ancient unburned fallen trees all over the ground are further proof of this.

(4) Los Padres planners estimate in the project proposal (page 11) that the 15,228 total of 24" diameter pine trees slated for harvest were all young trees in the 1930's.

Sam Sweet's analysis of the tree rings of fallen pines up to 30" in diameter indicates that the pine trees of this size near Reyes Peak may in fact be many hundreds of years old.

We must ask that the 24" diameter pine trees be properly dated, before any are cut.

(5) If you have personal memories of visiting the beautiful conifer forest landscape around Pine Mountain and Reyes Peak, please mention them.

(6) Tell LPNF staff that they are mistaken in placing the Reyes Peak project in a category with fires every 35 years or less (page 6).

(7) Los Padres staff also state in their project proposal (page 3) that the most recent fire in the project area was between 81 and 109 years ago. There is no evidence provided in the project proposal for this claim.

(On a recent phone-in Q & A with Los Padres Forest staff, I was told these dates [81-109 yrs] came from a data set. Specifically I was told that "fires were supposed to burn in up to 35 years" there. LPNF staff are basing their perceived need to remove thousands of ancient forest conifers near Reyes Peak on what they claim is "supposed" to be the localized fire frequency, rather than on the real world tree ring dating data from UCSB's Sam Sweet.)

(8) The project is claimed to help protect Camp Scheideck, a rural community of a few dozen homes, at its closest three miles away, when there is a fire.This seems unlikely, especially in strong winds.

(9) You are welcome also to oppose the fuelbreak in the high elevation chapparal in the Reyes Peak project.

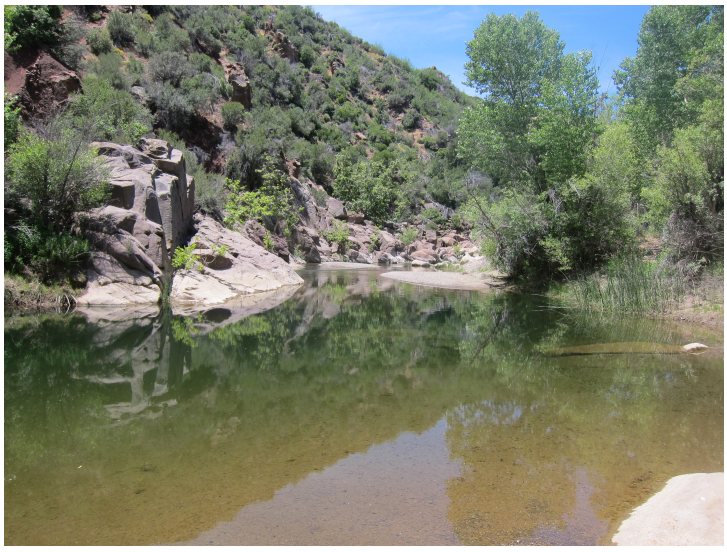
Please submit your comments to this email address, by end of day, June 30

gregory.thompson@usda.gov.

Title your email - "comments on Reyes Peak project."

LPNF's Reyes Peak Project can be found at this site - https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/lpnf/ - you can navigate from Land/Resource Management, to the project page.

IN THIS TIME OF LOCAL, NATIONWIDE AND WORLDWIDE EMERGENCY, WE URGE YOU TO SEND A DONATION TO THE CHARITY OF YOUR CHOICE WHICH IS HELPING PEOPLE SURVIVE COVID-19 HARDSHIP SOMEWHERE.
THANK YOU. KSWC WILL CONTINUE TO THRIVE WITHOUT YOUR DONATIONS AT THIS POINT.

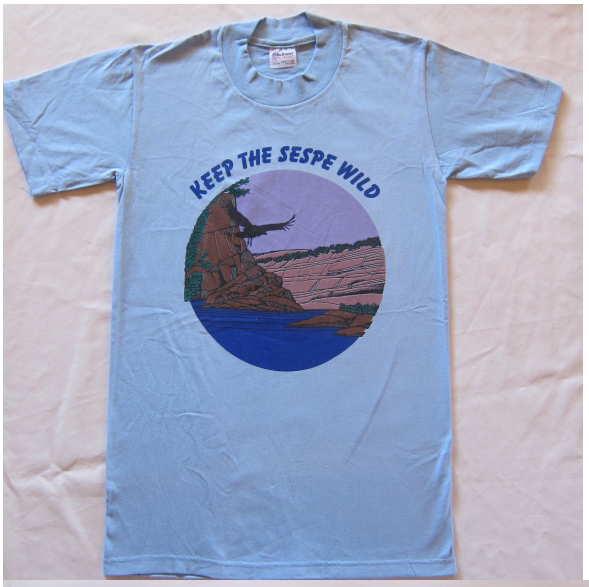


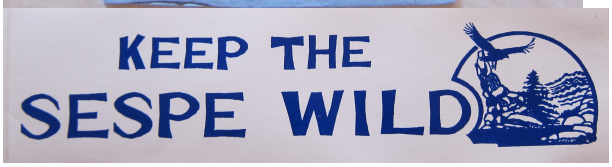
A pool on Sespe Creek just upstream of Cottrell Flat, close to the junction with Hot Springs Canyon, in May 2020. There was a stronger flow than usual, due to our late rains well into April.

KEEP SESPE WILD COMMITTEE
PO BOX 715
OJAI CA 93024

POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT 306
OJAI CA 93023

Address Service Requested





SESPE T-SHIRTS: $20
incl. tax & shipping.

<u>Light Blue T-shirts</u> - 5-color logo on front.

<u>White T-shirts</u> - 5-color logo on back, plus small blue pocket logo on front.

State white or blue, plus sizes - S, M, L, XL, or XXL.

T-shirts are 100% organic cotton.

SESPE BUMPERSTICKERS: $2
Mail orders to: KSWC, PO Box 715, Ojai CA 93024
Allow a few weeks for delivery.

A massive tamarisk plant we noted on our May 2020 tamarisk survey along Sespe Creek west of Cottrell Flat, which sits just upstream from the Sespe Hotsprings Canyon.

It has clearly been too long since we last checked this stretch of Sespe Creek. This one, and a few others somewhat smaller, are now on our list to be cut down and have their trunks removed down to their roots.

Fortunately there were no young tamarisk around it that would have grown from seeds from this parent plant. That may be because in dry years the creek here stops flowing in summer, making it harder for new seedlings to become established in the sandy soils.