

Timber!

Bohemian Club's long-term logging plan draws fire

By Patricia Lynn Henley

On the east bank of the Russian River slightly northeast of Monte Rio lie 2,700 acres of prime forestland. Portions of the property are home to old-growth redwoods, those rare survivors of extensive clear-cut logging that slashed through this region in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Some of these ancient giants have been growing here for a thousand years or more. They stand proudly among what's known as second-growth redwoods, trees that have thrust their branches skyward relatively undisturbed for more than a hundred years. The steep hillsides also hold towering Douglas firs as well as tanoaks and other less lofty flora.

This green area known as the Bohemian Grove will be the focus of intense national and international attention starting July 13, when it hosts the Bohemian Club's annual summer encampment. The somewhat boozy all-male gathering of world and business leaders relaxing privately together in the woods always raises concern because of its elite and secretive nature. But while it's good not to miss the forest for the trees, in this case it's equally important not to miss seeing the trees because of the activities of the people.

After eight decades of a hands-off policy, the San Francisco-based Bohemian Club began logging its Russian River land in the 1980s, taking out about 500,000 board-feet each year, for a cumulative total estimated at 10 million to 11 million board-feet of timber. For the past year, the club has pursued state approval for what's known as a nonindustrial timber management plan (NTMP), giving permanent permission to cut down more than 1 million board-feet annually without a lot of additional review.

Like anything associated with the Bohemian Club, the NTMP application has generated controversy. The related files at the California Department of Forestry (CDF) office in Santa Rosa are more than five inches thick, stuffed with letters of support and opposition, and filled with conflicting advice and reports.

Club officials say expanded logging is needed to sharply reduce the fire risk and to restore a forest that was deeply disturbed by clear-cutting more than a century ago. The

money from the timber sold, they say, will be used to pay the costs of shoring up access roads and clearing away underbrush, tanoaks and other potential fuel sources.

Opponents argue that the plan will increase rather than decrease the fire danger, destroying habitat on the land and in the two streams that cross the property. They charge that the club is treating its relatively pristine property like an industrial tree farm.

These conflicting viewpoints are based on differing visions of what an undisturbed forest in this area once looked like, and the steps needed to preserve and protect this increasingly rare stretch of riverside forest.

Sustainable Harvest?

"They call forestry a science, but there's a heck of a lot of art in it," laughs Ron Pape, a CDF employee who's worked in forestry for more than 30 years. He's responsible for leading what's officially known as the second review process for the Bohemian Club's NTMP application.

"The rural-urban interface is a real sensitive issue in general," Pape notes in a phone conversation from his Santa Rosa office. "I think because of where this is and who this is, the [Bohemian Club's] NTMP is probably drawing a little more lightning."

Prior to the early 1970s, Pape says, landowners could file a single piece of paper with the state and start cutting down trees the next day. They could log extensively, including next to rivers or creeks, without regard to erosion, sediment or the loss of wildlife habitat.

That has changed. According a 2003 CDF report, they have to file a timber harvest plan (THP) and do environmental impact reviews, a process that can cost roughly \$6,000 to \$40,000 for each THP. The plan lasts for three years, but can be extended for another two. Any additional logging requires the extensive review process of another THP.

However, small landowners with less than 2,500 acres of forestland can choose to file for an NTMP. Getting one approved costs 25 percent to 50 percent more than a THP but it's a single-shot deal; there is no expiration date. Once an NTMP is officially in place, it's no longer necessary to file a THP for each logging operation allowed by the plan, just what's known as an operations notice. The Bohemian Club property totals 2,700 acres, but it's applying for an NTMP on the 2,470 acres that are heavily forested.

The CDF estimates that there are more than 300,000 private non-industrial forest owners in California. They collectively hold about 3.2 million acres of trees, with another 4.2 million acres belonging to commercial companies. Started 17 years ago, NTMPs give a break to owners of smaller properties, cutting the red tape and overall costs for those who aren't harvesting trees on a commercial basis. In exchange, the state gets a promise to avoid clear-cutting and to abide by a timber plan tailored for that specific property.

An NTMP is intended to yield a sustainable harvest, where the number of trees removed is less than the predicted annual growth. The reviews required by state and federal forestry, fish, wildlife and water resources officials cover such aspects as erosion, water quality, sediment control, stream crossings, wildlife habitat and access roads.

It sounds straightforward, but critics say the CDF is too harvest-oriented, and that once an NTMP is approved there's not enough oversight or accountability, or any way to incorporate new methods and the evolving knowledge about forest ecology and preservation. The Bohemian Grove NTMP approval process has prompted a range of opinions on the impact of proposed logging, such as whether the fire danger will be increased or decreased by methods like opening up the overhead canopy to allow more light and space into the forest.

"It's not clear-cut," Pape says. "You've got scientists on one side who support the opening up of the stand, and you've got scientists on the other side. Whatever one side says, you've got somebody on the other side [saying something different]. It's battling scientists and experts."

Save the Grove

The Bohemian Club's NTMP is based on the concept that at some ideal point in history, North Coast redwood forests had widely spaced trees, open canopies, multi-age trees and a clean understory, says Don C. Erman, emeritus professor of biology at UC Davis. He disagrees with that image.

"Such a picture is surely the condition that will prevail under the proposed plan, but it has little basis in science as the natural condition," Erman asserts in a letter sent to the CDF on April 25. "The description of this early condition sounds quite similar to the myths used to claim that the Sierra Nevada forests looked the same way before intensive logging. Such a picture also implies that larger, older trees are a fire hazard, when all evidence suggests that these aged trees are the most fire-resistant."

In a phone conversation from his Davis office, Erman says that what particularly bothers him is the way fire danger is being used as a threat or weapon.

"There's a certain amount of 'the sky is falling, everything's going to burn down' as a means for driving otherwise reasonable people to say, 'Oh my gosh, I've got to get rid of everything that might burn.' I don't think this approach is good, particularly in the redwood region."

Approving the Bohemian Club's proposed NTMP, he believes, will create a developed harvest area with a permanent road system, fewer large (and slower growing) old trees and the use of herbicides to control undergrowth, instead of the tall stately trees and ample wildlife habitat that current exist.

Also opposing the proposed NTMP is Philip W. Rundel, distinguished professor of biology at UCLA. Having studied both Sierra and coast redwoods, Rundel asserts that the Bohemian Grove NTMP appears designed to maximize the logging of redwood and Douglas fir trees.

"This is not meant to maintain natural resources and ecosystems," Rundel charges in a phone conversation. He adds that the idea that these forests were historically open is based on looking at a very narrow period of time, which isn't accurate or backed by scientific evidence. Cool redwood forests, even those containing other trees, don't burn easily.

"If their goal was really to reduce the flammability, they wouldn't cut any large trees. Large trees don't burn in redwood forests," Rundel explains. "As long as you keep that humidity in there, it's not very flammable. But open it up to the light and put cut branches on the ground and it's going to burn really well."

In a letter to the CDF, Rundel argues that the NTMP overestimates the annual timber yield by including the old growth redwoods in the main encampment as part of the total annual growth. Since that area won't be logged, Rundel says, this inflates the amount of logging allowed in other places. "The areas where they're actually logging will not be sustainable. They can only say it's sustainable if they count the areas they're not cutting."

Log the Grove

Bohemian Grove logging will be carefully managed and completely sustainable, claims registered professional forester Nick Kent, who's creating the NTMP for the Bohemian Club. The proposed timber yield isn't based on a percentage of growth as Rundel assumes, Kent explains, but was created using a computer modeling program called Cooperative Redwood Yield Project's Timber Output, or CRYPTOS.

"The old growth area is treated independently," Kent explains. "Each area that harvests and grows is independent of other areas. We're not lumping it all together and determining a percent of inventory [to decide] how much we're cutting. We're cutting less than what will be growing over time. We will be checking those figures every 10 years. We'll be monitoring to be sure we're getting the growth modeled by CRYPTOS."

The computer program is a modern forest-industry tool, but in this case, Kent says, it's being used for preservation and restoration, not maximizing output. Right now, Kent adds, the grove is an extremely dense second-growth forest, with the majority of the large trees dating back to the heavy clear-cutting of a little over a century ago.

"What you've got is a dense overstory with very little regeneration of younger trees. There's not enough light reaching the forest floor to get a regeneration of trees," he says. "It's not a natural condition."

Critics argue that many of the century-plus second-growth trees are acquiring old-growth characteristics that make them perfect for habitat and forest restoration, and they should be saved. Under the NTMP, true old-growth trees with diameters of 40 or more inches and specific old-growth characteristics will not be harvested. However, larger second-growth trees could be cut to let in light and reduce the fire fuel.

But the allegation that the NTMP will maximize timber output is completely false, Kent says.

"I've never been told [by the Bohemian Club that] we need to harvest trees to generate money. They've told me that all the money that's coming off the forest [is] going back into the road system and reducing the fire hazard. They really want to protect their forest."

He adds that the NTMP is the club's direct response to realizing there's a high and continuing fire danger on the property. Bohemian Club general manager Matt Oggero says the club is doing what's best for the grove and the entire region to maintain the forest while reducing the risk of catastrophic fires, such as the one that hit the Sierras recently.

"The experts that we've consulted--and we have some of the biggest names, the best experts in the country--contend that the best way to manage the forest is to eliminate overcrowding which can lead to serious crown fires that can be devastating not only for loss of property but for loss of life," Oggero stresses. "We want to see the grove continue and flourish, and we think this is the best way to do that. Be assured that we're not talking about clear-cutting in any way, shape or form. This is selective logging."

One of the Grove's consultants is Tom Bonnicksen, professor emeritus of forest science at Texas A&M University. He's a staunch supporter of President Bush's Healthy Forest Initiative, which calls for allowing increased logging on federal lands, then using the timber money to pay the costs for thinning fire-prone areas. Environmentalists counter that this gives timber companies an excuse to overcut national forestlands.

Bonnicksen says he created a conceptual plan for the Bohemian Grove based on his 35 years of experience and his understanding of the area's historical condition.

"This is not your typical foggy redwood forest as you would find on the coast," Bonnicksen explains by telephone from his Florida home. "This is a redwood-fir forest with tanoaks. If anyone is picturing this as a wet redwood forest, they don't know what they're dealing with."

He says he's not familiar with the specifics of the Bohemian Grove NTMP, but that critics who assert that selective logging heightens the fire risk are "saying the same old things. They're using information from limited sources and generalizing from it in ways that are inconsistent with science."

It's important, Bonnicksen adds, to use history as a guide in managing forestlands. This, to him, means creating a more open forest. "You can't have big trees if they're all crowded together. Nor can you have a big harvest of corn if they're all crowded together. You're not going to get big trees if they're overcrowded in the forest. There is a way to manage the forest to protect the big old trees that you have and to provide room for new ones to grow. It's ultimately philosophical."

It's political, says Richard Coates, executive director of the Cazadero-based Forest Unlimited and the owner of 40 acres of timberland between Cazadero and Fort Ross. Forest Unlimited's mission, Coates says, is "to preserve, enhance and protect the forests of Sonoma County." In the past 15 years, he's read hundreds of timber plans and NTMPs. The Bohemian Grove proposal, he claims, will increase the fire danger. "When you want catastrophic fire, what you do is cut as much of the redwoods as you can."

Coates claims he's not opposed to timber harvests per se, but asserts that while individual CDF employees are dedicated and hard-working, the department itself and the entire review process is skewed in favor of landowners and industrial interests.

"It's a systemic problem that the landowners are allowed to purchase the opinions of people like the foresters and geologists and so on. That sets up a conflict of interest," Coates says. "The real problem is at the political level. The whole agency is tied up politically, because there's a lot of money involved. It's a classic case where the industry has captured the regulators."

On the contrary, argues San Mateo-based professional forester and Bohemian Club member Ralph Osterling, the high profile of the Bohemian Club has caused unreasonable delays in the standard NTMP process. In an April 18 letter to the CDF, Osterling argues that this effectively prevents "the property owner and their RPF [registered professional forester] from implementing legal and sound management practices, all of which are clearly within the forest practice rules. These rules apply equally to all property owners, yet it appears that this proposed NTMP is being singled out for added scrutiny by others."

Political Party

The Bohemian Club has certainly been scrutinized over the years. The nonprofit, nonpartisan group was founded in 1872 for socializing and enjoying the arts. Mark Twain, Bret Harte and Jack London were among the early members.

Held the last three weeks of July, the annual summer encampments by members and their guests began in 1899. The club acquired its 2,700 acres near Monte Rio over a period of several decades in the early 1900s, buying up properties that were considered relatively worthless after they were extensively logged.

Over the years, the membership-by-invitation-only club has attracted the nation's wealthiest and most powerful men, as well as well-founded criticism and far-fetched conspiracy theories prompted by its exclusionary and secretive ways. Club members say they simply want privacy as they relax with their peers in the forest. Opponents of the annual summer encampments allege that it's an elite gathering where friendships are formed between powerful men, who later negotiate with each other over lucrative government contracts and decisions that shape this country's future.

In a 2005 radio interview, Ralph Nader argued that no one in the government serving as a judge or on active military duty should attend this "exclusive, corporate-dominated, no-trespass confab. You can be sure that inside this grove they're not planning the salvation of Africa or abolition of poverty, universal healthcare, a living wage for people working to support their families on measly wages like Wal-Mart.

"What are they doing? They're getting to know each other, to reacquaint themselves from last year and to see each other in uninhibited poses that develops a kind of personal cement that further tightens the ruling cliques."

The annual summer encampment has continued despite repeated protests. The property's extensive forest was left untouched until, in the 1980s, citing concerns about the dense amount of potential fuel on the property, the club began logging operations under the guidance of professional forester Edward Tunheim. But the Bohemian Club and Tunheim parted ways in 2004, and club leaders hired Kent to create an NTMP allowing them to remove timber more rapidly and use the proceeds to remove fire-feeding tanoaks and brush. Tunheim declined to comment.

Kent says Tunheim brought out 500,000 board-feet annually from less acreage, and that the proposed NTMP will better manage the forest by cutting 1 million board-feet a year from a larger area, as well as creating what's known as shaded fuel breaks around the old growth to protect it from crown fires. The forest is mostly Douglas fir, Kent says, with redwood scattered throughout. Logging will be on a 20-year cycle, giving a relatively long interval between harvests. Stands of tanoaks will be removed and replanted with conifers, mostly redwoods.

"We will be monitoring those areas for brush control and regeneration," Kent explains. "If we need to replant those areas, we will. We're not just walking away. We're monitoring those areas."

Speaking for the Trees

John Hooper's great-grandfather, grandfather and uncles were all Bohemian Grove members, and as a kid he visited the grove with his grandfather. An organic farmer and avid hiker, Hopper was thrilled to become a member in 1999 and immediately started exploring the property's backcountry. He wasn't thrilled, however, when he saw the impacts of ongoing logging.

In 2001, Hooper raised concerns about a specific group of large trees marked for harvest, and club officials held things up until they could be sure no old growth was being inadvertently cut. But Hooper continued to come across logging-related damage.

"I'd go out on hikes, and a place that I loved had been logged the year before. It just got to be no fun."

Yet his ongoing questions were virtually ignored, he says. In July 2004, he discovered a remote little valley in a steep area along Kitchen Creek, home to several acres of large, majestic trees. Many were more than 40 or 50 inches in diameter, yet still splashed with blue spray paint as a sign that they would soon be cut down and turned into timber.

"When I saw the old growth trees marked, I just thought it was a mix-up," Hooper remembers. Once again he approached the club leaders, but this time, he says, "they pretty much ignored me."

In December 2004, discouraged and having been accused of "un-Bohemian" behavior, Hooper resigned his Bohemian Club membership but not his determination to fight for the property's preservation. He alleges that the original NTMP didn't disclose the existence of nine stands of magnificent redwoods on the property, that the logging will create a younger, smaller forest, and that important habitat will be lost. He charges that the property is being mismanaged and that the majority of Bohemian Club members don't understand what's really going on.

"This NTMP is proposing to double or triple the logging," Hooper charges. "Even with the modest level of logging that was going on in the last 20 years, a lot of damage was done."

Not true says Launce E. Gamble, a club member for 28 years and a property owner who's managed his own timberlands in Napa County. He says he's walked the Bohemian Grove property after it was logged and was pleased at how well the process was managed and how little damage was done.

"It's very environmentally correct. It's selectively done," he says by telephone from his San Francisco office. "It's a parklike atmosphere, and they have worked very hard to reduce the fuel loads all through the place, particularly up on the ridge tops."

He dismisses the concerns of professors Erman and Rundel. "Oftentimes, experts tend to not have a lot of practical experience. While they're entitled to their opinion, I would say they're wrong. By managing the property as it is being managed, it offers the community a buffer, not only for wildlife enhancement but the loss through fire."

Largest & Oldest

Wildlife habitat is one of Stacy Martinelli's chief concerns. Just as water-resource specialists and geologists have done in the past year, Martinelli, a staffer with the

California Department of Fish and Game, Bay-Delta Region, has visited the property and reviewed the NTMP. She's mapped out about 20 acres of old growth stands that weren't listed in the original plan, and she's recommending they be preserved from logging. The Bohemian Grove, she says, has a "higher component of large old trees than most [NTMPs] in Sonoma County," and she believes a tentative agreement has been reached to protect the specified 20 acres.

"Most of our concern at this point is keeping the largest and oldest trees on the landscape and providing some recruitment for those trees, letting them develop over time," Martinelli explains. "When these trees fall down, leaving hiding and nesting places, there will be big trees to replace them."

When an NTMP application is filed, a first review is done on paper. Then representatives of interested agencies visit the site for what's called a pre-harvest inspection. The next step is the second review, a back-and-forth between the agencies and the landowners' forester to create a final NTMP document.

Because this NTMP has been delayed, the California Water Resources Department is working directly with Kent and the Bohemian Club to fix existing roads and stream crossings on the property this summer, before the rainy season. A National Marine Fisheries biologist recently filed a 46-page review, reporting that after logging resumed in the grove in the 1980s the road system roughly doubled. More roads are planned, but the federal report asserts that the total road miles should be reduced, and that "Instead of converting the site through industrial silviculture and adding to existing disturbances, the Bohemian Grove should be protected and enhanced."

The next (and possibly final) second review session for the Bohemian Grove NTMP will be held in August. It's open to the public, but it's not a public meeting; questions must be addressed to the government officials, not to the representatives of the landowner. Kent will have about 10 days to reply to the second review recommendations and then, because of a recent court decision, the public will have 30 days to review the final NTMP document.

Stacey Martinelli hopes people will pay attention. "Essentially, the public will not have the opportunity to comment on timber-harvesting activities in the Bohemian Grove ever again. This is it."

And Hooper still hopes Bohemian Club members will take a more in-depth look at what's being proposed and save more of the tall, beautiful trees on their property.

"They've already done irreparable harm," he says of the logging operations. He adds wistfully, "When you get into those really old trees, you're walking into a cathedral."