

Monumental Outlook Over The Horizon

(What's Happening on the Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National Monument)

By

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Hello Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National Monument Stakeholders!

A month ago, the Porterville Recorder gave me an opportunity to introduce myself to the community as the new Forest Supervisor of the Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National Monument. I welcomed the chance to present a glimpse of myself to you.

I was asked during my interview if I would be interested in submitting a monthly article to the Porterville Recorder updating the community on activities the forest/monument was implementing to better serve the public. I said yes, as I felt what better way to communicate with those who are interested in what is happening on the Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National Monument than through the local newspaper. This article is the first in a series of articles that I hope will give you an insight into how your national forest is being managed to provide goods and services for the public to use.

The focus of this article will be the work the forest recently completed in the **Golden Trout Wilderness** (GTW) area. Before I summarize what we did, let me ask this question, "***Why do we have wilderness areas and how do we manage them?***" I am asking this question as I want you to think about why you love wilderness areas, and also think how does a person get to enjoy the beauty and solidarity a wilderness area provides.

The Sequoia National Forest manages (co-manages) six wilderness areas: Monarch, Jennie Lakes, Golden Trout, Dome Land, Kiavah, and Sierra Wilderness areas. Over the years, it has been difficult to form and manage a trail crew to patrol these wilderness areas to clear trails. The Forest has utilized the services of volunteer, conservation crews, and partnerships with organizations; but the amount of resources needed to clear trails continues to escalate each year. This is due in part to recent fires (like the Manter Fire in 2000, the McNally Fire in 2002 and the Jacks Fire in 1997), which have increased the number of dead trees that have died over the years and have fallen over trails.

In the Golden Trout Wilderness alone there are over 147 miles of trails to maintain. The Golden Trout Wilderness is home to the brightly colored California state fish, the golden trout, which lives in relative abundance in the waters of the Wilderness area. The 303,511 acre Wilderness consists of a large drainage basin surrounded by high, jagged peaks on the west in the Sequoia National Forest, and the eastern portion, the Inyo National Forest is primarily an extension of the Kern Plateau.

On the Sequoia's portion of the Golden Trout Wilderness, elevations range from 4,700 feet at the Forks of the Kern River, to 12,432 feet on Mt. Florence, the highest peak on

the Forest. Vegetation ranges from digger and piñon pine woodlands at lower elevations; extensive Jeffrey pine forests at mid elevations; and red fir, lodgepole and foxtail pine at higher elevations. Portions of the GTW also occur above timberline. The entire Little Kern River drainage lies within the Wilderness. The North and South Forks of the Kern Wild and Scenic Rivers bisect this Wilderness. Exceptionally scenic backpacking and horsepacking trails transverse approximately 150 miles of the area.

Over the past couple of years, the Forest has implemented a resource tool - Wildland Fire Use (WFU) - to manage sections of the forest by using naturally-burning fires to help to restore ecological forest health, and mitigating the escalating costs of fire suppression. Resource benefits of this management tool include: improved long-term watershed conditions, enhanced wildlife habitat and more resilient forested ecosystems. In 2006, the Sequoia had three Wildland Fire Uses (Maggie, Tamarack and Broder-Beck) in both the Golden Trout and South Sierra Wildernesses for a total of 10,200 acres.

Despite all our efforts, we have not been able to keep up with the volume of trees needing to be removed for public safety, as well as, clearing trails for fire-fighting crews to access trails and areas further back in the wilderness area. I decided this year, in order to provide accessibility for the firefighters to obtain access into an area to fight a wildland fire or to implement wildland-fire use, and also to protect the public's safety and wilderness values, it was necessary to authorize the use of chainsaws in some wilderness areas for a short period of time. This decision was made based on an internal review by specialists identifying the best way to clear trails from vegetation for firefighters to access, and also to improve accessibility for the public; as well as, reviewing the effects on resources (particularly wildlife habitat and wilderness values). The Forest utilized the Minimum Requirements Decision Guide and documented the decision through the environmental process. Firefighting crews were used to fall hazardous trees and remove the downed trees from the trail (which were spread throughout the area).

During the period of May thru June of 2007, the Porterville Organized Firefighting Crews accomplished 60 miles of trail maintenance in the Golden Trout Wilderness for firefighter and research access for WFU monitoring. The crews were utilized for ground access to the WFU's to bring in monitoring devices. Fourteen hand crews were utilized at different times during this period. The primary accomplishment was the removal of trees that had fallen across the trail and removal of various brush types that encroached upon the trail. These trees ranged in diameter from 6 inches to 6 feet; with some areas completely impassable due to the tremendous amount of downed trees. The crews also located and opened two trail routes that had been abandoned 10 to 15 years ago due to impassable conditions caused by down trees, and brush along trail routes.

In addition to the hand crews used during the operation, four agency pack trains from other forests were utilized which emphasized a wilderness ethic to transport support material and camp supplies to the hand crews that were camping in the wilderness while the trail work was being accomplished. These pack trains are the last of a forest service

tradition which were invaluable to the operation. The cost savings was 1/15 the price of helicopters and more versatile. The utilization of the pack trains allowed fresh food to be brought into camps every 3-4 days, limiting the need to use Meals Ready to Eat (MRE'S). Meal costs decreased from \$35 per person/day to \$13 per day.

The trail maintenance work that occurred this past summer in the Golden Trout Wilderness improved accessibility for all. As I stated above, trees had fallen across the trails, brush has grown in, and some trail tread has worn into erosion channels or protruding rocks. Numerous blown down trees were blocking the main arterial trails and secondary collector trails in the west one-third area of the GTW. The obstruction of trails over the years with little or no maintenance meant trail braiding was occurring creating numerous routes around the obstruction as each visitor or visitor group picks what it considers the "safest" way around trees blocking the trails. This braiding detracts from the untrammelled character of the Golden Trout Wilderness and causes erosion.

Now, the crews did have guidelines for how wide to clear the trails and how to cut the trees and/or brush. The trail work guidelines stated the trails should be cleared 4 feet from either side of the center of the trail. For steep uphill sides where vegetation was encroaching or might interfere with travel (especially pack stock), the crews could expand the clearing width to about 6 feet up the slope. The guidelines also stated that plant material and debris should be cleared all the way to the ground; all plant stems would be cut as close to the ground as possible within the corridor. The crews were requested to scatter the resulting debris as far as practical on the downhill side, avoiding windrows, and to toss stems and branches so the cut ends lies away from the trail. Finally, the guidelines instructed the crews to remove small diameter trees that are within the corridor and dispose of material on the downhill side of the trail; and to cut rounds of trees that have fallen across the trail to a minimum of 10 feet on each side of the trail.

While these guidelines were somewhat clear, the devil is always in the details of how something gets implemented. From monitoring that has been conducted by supervisors and crew leaders, and also from you the public, it has come to my attention that in some instances we may have exceeded the guidelines. Some sections of trails show we cleared more then 4 feet from either side of the trail. Some sections we removed more branches then may have been needed, and in some instances we may have cleared more brush and cut more trees then necessary.

Monitoring and identifying lessons learned are key mechanisms for improving procedures to strengthen project implementation. The trail work guidelines that were developed need to be modified, and will be before we begin work next year. We also will be initiating a monitoring program to ensure we have not caused damage to the landscape through what we accomplished this year. Based on what we learned this year, the Forest is in the process of developing an agreement with a volunteer organization to monitor the trail maintenance work in the GTW this fall and next spring. We also, will be retraining the firefighting crews next year to ensure they understand how a trail is

cleared in a wilderness (which is different then clearing a trail in a recreation site or clearing a trail for a fuelbreak).

I appreciate the comments from some of you who have informed me and my staff of what you have seen while enjoying your national forest. *Please*, keep these comments coming as this is a very good avenue for us to receive feedback on what you see happening on the landscape. These comments have been informative and thought-provoking. Feedback from trail users has been positive, but there is always room for improvement. I welcome your comments, whether you agree on the work we accomplished or not. The ultimate goal is to clear the trails in the Golden Trout Wilderness for firefighter and public safety and access. Improving how we implement this goal now and in the future is what I want to hear from you, so if you have comments, please go to the Sequoia National Forest website at www.fs.fed.us/sequoia and submit your comments electronically, or you can call the Supervisor's Office in Porterville. Your feedback is vital to how we can improve our procedures for future projects.