

Clearing forests; saving lives

By **STEVE BAXMAN**

Published: Wednesday, April 9, 2008 at 4:30 a.m.

Last Modified: Wednesday, April 9, 2008 at 3:26 a.m.

Santa Rosa Press Democrat

During 37 years with the Monte Rio Fire Protection District, I have learned that fire doesn't care. It doesn't care about the homes it destroys, the wildlife habitat it chars, the forest it decimates. Fire feeds on and searches out fuel sources -- most typically dense, dry or dead vegetation. If you live in the middle of or near such a source, then fire will find you sooner or later.

Thirty years ago, when I was starting out as a firefighter in this county, our ability to fight wildland fires was significantly hampered by a lack of access roads. No access meant thick brush on the forest floor -- prime stomping grounds for a massive fire.

Since then, timber harvesting operations have improved our ability to contain and fight destructive blazes. And they have reduced fuel loads that might otherwise feed a fire. But as recent events in San Diego, San Bernardino and Lake Tahoe have shown us, Californians need to remain ever vigilant.

And now here in Monte Rio we need to be honest about the danger we face in our own backyard. We haven't built this town to what it is by being anything less than serious about fire prevention.

Homeowners and landowners all over California face increasing liability for failing to manage their holdings responsibly to reduce the risk of fire. In our corner of Sonoma County, the Bohemian Club is no different, having applied for a non-industrial timber management plan to reduce the fuel load in its 2,700-acre forest.

I am writing in support of Bohemian Club's plans, which will be considered by the state Department of Forestry at a hearing on Thursday. I believe the plans are in the best interest of public safety for Monte Rio and surrounding communities. This isn't a political argument, this is common sense.

By some estimates there are as many as 8,000 dead oak trees on the Bohemian Grove property, representing a prime fuel source and a major threat. I helped fight fires in San Bernardino twice where trees killed by a beetle infestation -- but left standing -- served to keep fires burning thousands of acres. Now sudden oak death has moved here, killing trees that without proper harvesting will raise the chances of a destructive blaze.

I'm in the business of encouraging landowners to responsibly manage their properties to reduce fire danger. The Bohemian Club is doing what it should in proposing thinning operations in their forest.

What they want to do will help us create fire breaks and better access for fire crews in the event of a blaze, lessen the danger of a fire spreading from the grove, clear crowded brush and address the problem of dead trees. And it is a real problem, folks.

We know what happens when a fire finds a crowded, under-managed forest to sustain it. This fire will keep burning until it's at your front door -- or mine. This is our wake-up call. We all should do our part to clear brush and trees to keep safe not only our homes but our entire community and our way of life.

Long ago, the native peoples who called Sonoma County home routinely burned portions of the forest to improve and enrich soil. These relatively small fires helped reduce brush and smaller trees while posing little threat to towering redwoods protected by their thick bark. Today those redwoods, many of them hundreds or thousands of years old, remain. But in places like the Bohemian Grove, overgrown vegetation poses a very real threat to these giants of the forest.

Please join me in supporting responsible forest management practices at the Bohemian Grove and elsewhere in Sonoma County.

The basic facts are indisputable: forests left to grow without proper thinning pose an enormous fire danger. Better spacing of trees in a forest promotes healthier conditions suitable for new growth and wildlife habitat.

Will it take a destructive or deadly fire in Sonoma County to demonstrate the foresight of the Bohemian Grove's application for a timber management plan? I certainly hope not.

Steve Baxman is Monte Rio Fire chief.

rebuttal letter:

CLOSE TO HOME

By RICK COATES

Published: Wednesday, April 16, 2008 at 4:30 a.m.

Last Modified: Wednesday, April 16, 2008 at 3:32 a.m.

Santa Rosa Press Democrat

Monte Rio Fire Chief Steve Baxman raised some important points in his April 9 Close to Home column, "Clearing forests; saving lives."

In particular, his premise that "fire feeds on fuel sources -- typically dense, dry or dead vegetation" is correct and provides good guidance for addressing forest management techniques that will reduce fire hazards. This good advice does not, however, fully address the Bohemian Club's application to the California Department of Forestry for a Non-Industrial Timber Management Plan.

Opponents of the Bohemian Club's commercial logging application have consistently emphasized that they support the club's efforts to thin thickets of genuinely fire prone hardwoods on the property. These include tanoak, bay laurel, madrone, ceanothus and other brushy understory trees. We agree with Chief Baxman on the nature of the work which needs to be undertaken on the property to reduce fire hazard.

It is important to clarify that the thinning and removal of hardwoods, including tanoak killed by Sudden Oak Death, which Baxman speaks of, can be accomplished without approval of a timber management plan and, in fact, the Bohemian Club has recently initiated such a program.

However, this appropriate targeting of truly fire prone hardwood stands is an entirely different matter than the proposed commercial logging of redwood and fir at a rate of more than 1 million board feet per year from the Bohemian Grove.

This is an important distinction that Chief Baxman's article fails to make clear.

As UCLA biology professor Philip W. Rundel wrote last May in a letter to CDF concerning the Bohemian Club's proposed logging plan last year: "This is clearly a logging project, not a project to reduce fire hazard. Old growth redwood forests have very low flammability. It is only when these forests are thinned and light openings are present in the canopy that flammable shrubs and tanbark oak can invade these stands. As a result, fire intensity, the spread rate of fire, and flame lengths will be much higher than if these stands were left in their natural state. Once a cycle of thinning is established, reduction of fire hazard inevitably involves heavy regular applications of herbicides to reduce shrub establishment and prevent

the growth of ladder fuels with all the negative aspects of such herbicide treatments."

The Bohemian Club began logging its property commercially in the mid-1980s under the authority of some 18 consecutive timber harvesting plans. Since that time, more than 11 million board feet of redwood and fir (500,000 board feet per year) have been sold from the Bohemian Grove.

The net result of these damaging two decades of logging has been, as admitted in the draft timber management plan, an increase in fire hazard across the property.

The plan in question will double the rate of commercial logging. How this dramatic increase will improve the situation has never been made clear.

In conclusion, the Bohemian Grove is not an ordinary logging tract. It includes the largest remnant stands of old growth redwood in Sonoma County, twice as big as the old growth component of Armstrong State Reserve. Even the second growth component of the forest is in the 100- to 110-year-old range and well on its way to becoming reestablished as old growth habitat.

UC Berkeley wildlife management professor Reginald H. Barrett wrote in a September letter to CDF: "Department of Fish and Game (DFG) concluded that the NTMP could adversely affect a number of wildlife species, because it will substantially reduce the stands of larger, older trees with dense canopies . . . I agree with DFG's concerns about the plan's impacts on wildlife, and I do not believe these impacts have been mitigated."

We urge all citizens of Sonoma County to speak out for protection of the Bohemian Grove.

It must be understood that fire hazard can be reduced by removing hardwoods without jeopardizing one of our great forest legacies.

Rick Coates is the executive director of Forest Unlimited and a Cazadero resident.