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Decision close on controversial logging plan on Neeley Hill near Guerneville and Monte Rio

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SLIDE 1 OF 3

John Dunlap is opposed to a 224-acre logging plan for the area above Neeley Road, near Vacation Beach, visible on the right of the Russian River, between Guerneville and Monte Rio. Local opponents to the plan are concerned about erosion, landslides, sediment, and impacts to wildlife, wildfire and the scenic corridor. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

MARY CALLAHAN

MOST POPULAR



A decision on a controversial and long-delayed logging plan in the hills above the Russian River between Guerneville and Monte Rio could receive a thumbs-up or thumbs-down as early as Tuesday.

A verdict on the Silver Estates timber harvest plan has been delayed 23 times since its first round of public review in 2020 — a result of significant local opposition, plan additions and adjustments, as well as Cal Fire staffing changes.

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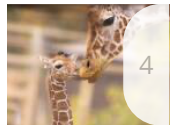
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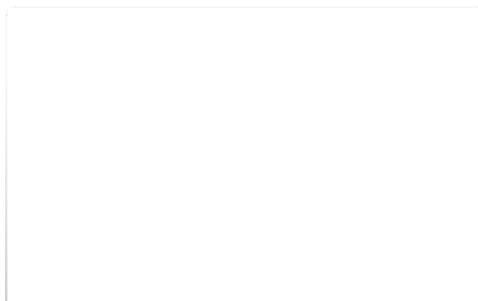
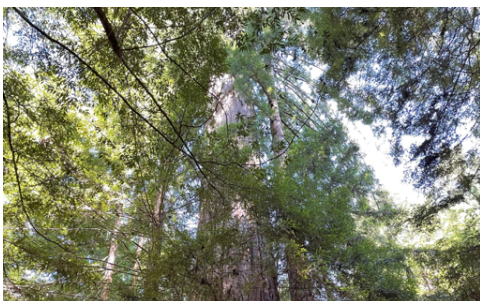


But even as parties on both sides await news of the proposal's fate, a whole new possibility has cropped up that could have profound implications.

West County Supervisor Lynda Hopkins has initiated conversations with landowner Roger Burch about the potential for a conservation purchase of the property, she said.

The land at issue includes Neeley Hill, a prominent feature that rises above Neeley Road, across the Russian River from Guerneville Park, about three-quarters of a mile south of Guerneville. The property doglegs along Mays Canyon Road back toward the river area across from Northwood Golf Club at the edge of Monte Rio.

The Clar Tree, a roughly 340-foot-tall redwood tree estimated to be 2,000 years old, is in that area. About 14 feet in diameter at its base, it may be the tallest tree on private property in the world, some say.





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Hopkins said the fact that the Russian River Sanitation District already disperses highly treated wastewater in the area creates a natural tie to the county and the Sonoma County Water Agency, which runs the district servicing Guerneville and Rio Nido.

“We are very interested in acquiring the property for the conservation value, as well as it is adjacent to our waste water treatment plan,” Hopkins said. “And then, of course, the Clar Tree is just this magnificent specimen that we would love to preserve.”

Nick Kent, resource manager for Redwood Empire Sawmills, previously had said the land was zoned for timber production, it’s actually rural residential, meaning it could be divided into six buildable parcels.

Its development potential typically would make it more attractive as a conservation purchase, though that remains to be seen.

Representatives for Burch, owner of the Redwood Empire Sawmills, and the tax-funded Sonoma County Open Space and Agricultural Preservation District, already had initiated conversations

about the property before Hopkins stepped in, but no discussions are underway, district Acquisitions Manager Jen Kuzmar said.

She noted, “There’s a whole lot of steps between where we are and closing a deal.”

Kent said Burch had become open to selling the property in any case, before or after logging, depending on Cal Fire’s decision and whether a buyer appears soon enough.

“If this plan gets approved, we can’t really do anything on it this winter anyway,” he said.

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"We look at every property in terms of its value, and it has pretty high value as a developable property, and so that's really how we look at it," Kent said. "If we don't sell it, we would continue to manage it as timberland."

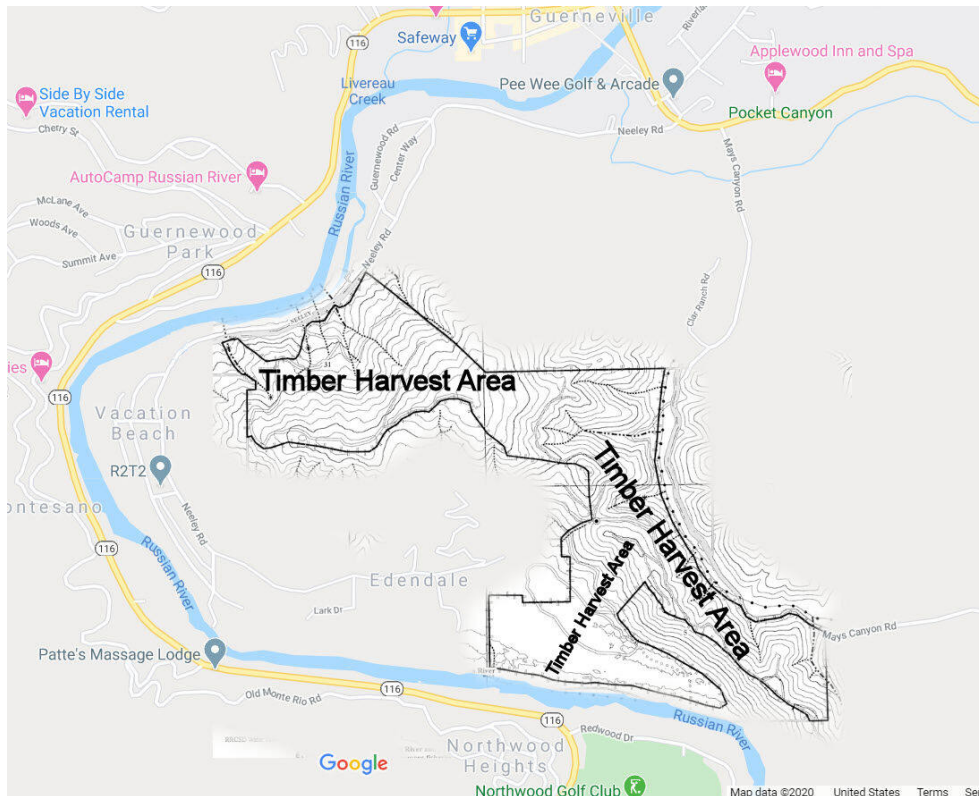
He said the proposed harvest was a necessary part of managing productive timberlands and maintaining their value by thinning excess tree stems and opening up the forest in select locations.

The approach calls for a "light touch," he said. "It's a select harvest. It's not going to be very visible to most people."

"That property has been timberland for generations," Kent said. "The Clar family owned it before (Louisiana-Pacific Corp.) and then we owned it. It's been continuously selectively harvested all these years, and we're just continuing to manage it as timberland."

The property was last logged in 2006, however, and its proximity to river neighborhoods means prospects for renewed logging have drawn more attention than they might have otherwise.

The grassroots Guerneville Forest Coalition has mobilized hundreds of people to file objections to the proposal.



Map of the general vicinity of the proposed Silver Estates timber harvest project in western Sonoma County. (Guerneville Forest Coalition)

Among other things, critics cite fears of increased landslide risks on the steep, sometimes unstable landscape; heightened fire danger; degraded of scenic values; and potential harm to the Clar Tree, which they say needs a buffer 4 1/2 times the

75 feet provided for in the timber harvest plan, if the roots are to be protected.

The project also is within the State Scenic Highway 116 corridor, a point raised both by citizen critics and Sonoma County officials, who have provided grant funding to the Forest Coalition for a professional visual assessment to begin later this month.

Coalition members also have raised concerns about the adequacy of spotted owl surveys, seismic assessments, runoff into the river and an already impaired culvert beneath Neeley Road.

“We weren’t entirely opposed to timber harvesting,” said John Dunlap, a leader in the group and resident of Guerneville Park, located across the river from the property. “We just thought it wasn’t being handled properly.”

Dunlap said he believes the plan was irredeemably flawed from the beginning, and that revisions haven’t changed that.

His group has previously tried to recruit a conservation buyer for the property, so far without success.

The timber harvest plan is now in the hands of Eric Huff, staff chief with Cal Fire’s Forest Practice Program, who said Tuesday he had yet to determine whether he’ll grant the plan a green light.

Huff said he still had many hours ahead of “immersive” scrutiny of the logging plan, public input and responses to objections and comments made before deciding whether the plan conforms with state Forest Practice Rules.

“My goal is to get this decision wrapped up,” Huff said from Sacramento. “I think that the plan review has gone on for long enough. I think it’s time to a point where we can make a decision one way or the other.”

You can reach Staff Writer Mary Callahan (she/her) at 707-521-5249 or mary.callahan@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @MaryCallahanB.



When it comes to the environment in Sonoma County, what are you concerned or wondering about? Do you have solutions to share? Submit your thoughts below to help us craft our reporting in the region.

Mary Callahan

**Environment and Climate Change,
The Press Democrat**

I am in awe of the breathtaking nature here in Sonoma County and am so grateful to live in this spectacular region we call home. I am amazed, too, by the expertise in our community and by the commitment to protecting the land, its waterways, its wildlife and its residents. My goal is to improve understanding of the issues, to find hope and to help all of us navigate the future of our environment.

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Conversation

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Join the conversation, Hannah10



Hannah10

1 MIN AGO

This plan needs to be rejected by Cal Fire. Why has it taken them 2.5 years to review a plan if it isn't inherently flawed. The fact is that Cal Fire (aka Dept of Forestry) is staffed by loggers who see trees as crops. It's time for Cal Fire to listen to the public and stop working on behalf of big timber!

REPLY 0 0



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38 MIN AGO

Let the forestry manager's do their jobs or let the NIMBY self interest group buy the land.

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Ok

1 HR AGO

Complicated environmental issues. Something which hasn't made the news for awhile.

Maybe contact former parks boss Caryl Hart and ask her to relive her experiences buying land and recording easements (at huge public expense).

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RYE793

1 HR AGO

I can't wait until Hopkins is a distant memory...

REPLY 2 0



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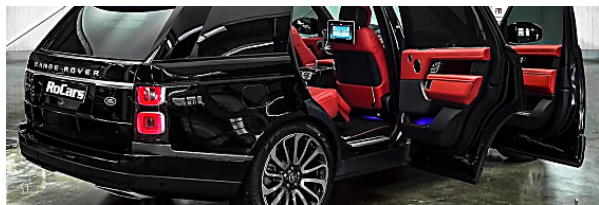
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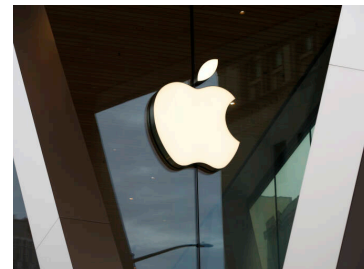
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