

FEATURED

## Guerneville Forest Coalition and residents lobby for more Clar Tree protections, mitigation measures for proposed logging operation

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Mar 31, 2021



Ancient giant — The 340-foot, 2,000-year-old Clar Tree is the tallest tree in Sonoma County and a Guerneville group and residents are raising concern over a proposed logging operation near the tree. Folks are concerned the tree's buffer zone isn't large enough among other safety and environmental concerns.

Photo courtesy Guerneville Forest Coalition

The Guerneville Forest Coalition — a nonprofit group of Guerneville community members, business owners and landowners — is raising concern over a proposed 224-acre Timber Harvest Plan and logging operation in the Silver Grove area near the 2,000-year-old Clar Tree, an ancient redwood that is the tallest tree in Sonoma County.

And while the Timber Harvest Plan (THP) for the proposed logging area has protection measures in place for the tree, including a 75-foot buffer zone, many believe the great tree would be insufficiently protected by the allotted buffer zone.

There are also other concerns with the operation, including increased fire risk, flooding, erosion and landslides, Russian River sedimentation and the effect on local flora and fauna.

“In June 2020, a plan was filed with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire) by a major timber operator to log 224 acres of redwoods and Douglas firs near the banks of the Russian River,” according to the Guerneville Forest Coalition.

Since then, the group and concerned citizens in the area have been vocal in their opposition toward the plan and have been lobbying for more protective measures for the Clar Tree.

“It's been around for a very long time and it's also a tree that was protected and a lot of people went to its defense in 1986 when Louisiana Pacific wanted to cut it down. There are a ton of people who are still alive today who can't believe that we're sort of having to deal with another

timber harvest and a harvest around the tree,” said John Dunlap of the Guerneville Forest Coalition. “They are saving the tree this time around, so that’s good news, but part of the big issue with this THP is — based on our research — a 75-foot radius is really small for a tree of this age.”

Redwood trees can have large root systems that extend over 300 feet from the tree itself (the Clar Tree is around 340 feet) so effects on the root system are also a concern.

“So only having a 75-foot buffer zone really isn’t adequate in this case,” Dunlap said.

Redwood tree root systems are important to protect because they make up a vast array of integral root structures, according to Dunlap.

“The root system provides structural integrity, especially if there are high winds, and the root systems of various redwoods will provide each other with additional stability and they will often share nutrients and protect each other in that way, so when you start to take out all of the trees beyond 75-feet you could be damaging the tree for that reason as well,” he said.

He said the other concern is that the trees that surround the Clar Tree create sort of a buffer for the tree from wildfire, and those protective trees could be logged during the operation.

“This plan has a total acreage of 224 acres and it has three different types of what we call silviculture, different methods on how the forest stand is going to be harvested. There’s 51 acres of single tree selection and 33 acres of group selection and 124 acres of transition silviculture. A transition harvest is typically done if you currently don’t have a lot of different age classes (of trees). It allows you to go from an even age stand to an uneven age stand,” said Dominik Schwab, a forester with CalFire who is reviewing the Silver Grove THP.

An even age stand is a group of trees that are all around the same age and have grown up together, whereas an uneven age stand is a cohort of trees that vary in age.

“The ones that will be harvested will be marked with paint and that’s how the logger knows which ones to cut and which ones to leave and that’s decided by the forester,” Schwab said.

The plan is an effort of Roger Burch. Burch owns Redwood Empire Sawmill in Cloverdale and Asti and owns the Silver Estates land under a family trust.

“We’re doing a selective harvest, the property hasn’t been harvested for over 20 years,” said Nick Kent, resource manager for the Redwood Empire Sawmill. “It’s a normal reentry into the property just to thin it out and maintain the stand health and keep the timberland production zone, its land that we log on a rotational basis, every 15 or 20 years.”

An additional worry with the plan is that the removal of the fire resistant redwood trees could allow highly flammable brush species and other shrubs to flourish in the wake of the redwoods.

Kent said the forest is getting thick and so they need to thin it out in order to reduce fire danger.

“The Clar Tree also exists on a flood zone plain and so having substantial root systems is critical to protect the tree from flooding. You want to protect it from wind, flooding and you want to protect it from fire and you want the tree to share in the symbiotic relationship with the other redwoods around the tree,” Dunlap explained.

There are also landslide and erosion related concerns with the THP.

According to the Guerneville Forest Coalition website, “The official Erosion Hazard Rating for the plan area is moderate to high. There are significant existing and potential erosion sites at logging roads and stream crossings. Landslides and road blockages could prevent evacuations during floods, fires, and other emergencies.”

The plan does contain mitigation measures for erosion hazards.

“In this case the erosion hazard rating is moderate to high. Once an erosion hazard rating is determined then a lot of other forest practice rules fall into place. For instance, how often they need to put in erosion control structures,” Schwab said.

Kent said they hired a geologist to come out and survey the site and to notify them what areas of the site to avoid and where to be cautious.

“We’re taking out a mix of trees, small, medium and large and we’re staying off any sensitive soils. We had a geologist look at the entire property and we’re staying off any unstable slopes. When we’re in there we’ll upgrade the roads for better drainage. We’ll try to reduce any runoff from the roads and fix them up,” Kent said.

Schwab said there are also certain restrictions for protecting Coho Salmon habitats, Northern Spotted Owls and any endangered species, plus an owl and bird survey was conducted so loggers know where to avoid cutting where.

Protective stream buffers are also required.

“The plan also contains mitigations to protect forest resources. For instance, the forester needs to include mitigations for any pest management, for instance they need to prevent the spread of Sudden Oak Death and so there are mitigations in the plan for that. More specifically, the way the trees are to be harvested and then removed from the forest, we call that the yarding method, and in this case there are two yarding methods proposed. There is a ground-based with a tractor and there’s also proposed the use of cable yarders,” Schwab said.

Sedimentation from logging is also a worry among those in the coalition.

“It’s on the banks of the river and we don’t want to see sedimentation get into the river,” said Colin Baptie, a member of the Guerneville Forest Coalition.

The website states that sediment from deforested slopes could enter watersheds and the Russian River, threatening endangered Coho Salmon and Steelhead trout.

Kent said they cannot cut within 30 feet of the Russian River and 13 of the largest trees per acre and 80% of the canopy will be retained within that 30-foot vicinity. Inland, they plan to leave 13 of the largest trees per acre and 50% of the canopy will be retained.

“So, it is a very light harvest,” Kent said.

In terms of other wildlife concerns, the Clar Tree and the surrounding area is home to over 20 sensitive, threatened or endangered species, including the northern spotted owl, the great blue heron and the osprey.

“So, there’s a ton of reasons to protect the tree and expand the buffer zone beyond 75-feet,” Dunlap said.

According to official public comments submitted to CalFire with regards to the THP, some say 300 to 340-feet would be a sufficient buffer zone for the Clar Tree.

Robert Rawson, who was one of the four wastewater treatment plant operators who started up the Russian River County Sanitation District (RRCSD) wastewater treatment facilities in the 1980s, advised CalFire in a public comment letter to make the buffer zone for the tree 340 feet.

“Having designed, planted, and operated redwood irrigation systems including RRCSD, and Graton CSD, over the course of 40 years, and conducted studies on redwood tree transpiration rates at Sonoma State with a grant from the City of Santa Rosa Public Works Department in 1999; I am qualified to render an opinion on the impact of removing redwood trees from the RRCSD recycled irrigation system. It is my opinion that any removal of redwood trees will reduce their total mass and number of transpiring units. If you think of the redwood trees as water conducting vessels and reduce the number of these it is obvious that this will reduce the maximum transpiration disposal capacity of this forest. This is true even though some individual redwood trees will experience marginally increased transpiration rates due to reduced canopy,” Rawson wrote. “Decreasing the number of transpiring trees will reduce total transpiration, and is likely to place a strain on the remaining trees. When they are over irrigated, they are forced to expend energy in the form of sugar, and dispose of the excess water through their stomata by glutation. They do this to move water away from their roots so as to prevent them from becoming anaerobic and drowned. The 2000-year-old Clar Tree is particularly vulnerable to this as it has already been damaged by logging, lightning strikes, over irrigation, and the fact that its roots form interlocking support with the surrounding redwoods, some of which are likely to be suckers of the Clar Tree that are connected to its extensive root system which extends at least as far horizontally as its original height a diameter of perhaps 340 feet in all directions. Any logging in the vicinity of the Clar Tree would undoubtedly hasten its death.”

He said whether the THP is approved or not, the Clar Tree should have a buffer zone of at least 340 feet.

Protective measures for the Clar Tree that have been put in place include the 75-foot buffer, a provision that the logger must fall trees away from the Clar Tree and pink signage around the 75-foot buffer zone of the tree that says, “Do not cut.”

“The California Department of Fish & Wildlife (CDFW) recommended that the Clar Tree be retained as a wildlife tree, and that a 75-foot no-cut buffer be placed around the Clar Tree. In compliance with the CDFW recommendation, THP page 77 provides for a ‘No harvest’ buffer placed around the Clar Tree, and a provision that the logger must fall any trees designated for harvest outside of the no-cut buffer away from the Clar Tree. These provisions would all be enforceable by CalFire if the plan were to be approved. Also, pink flagging labelled ‘Do Not Cut’ (was placed) in a 75-foot radius encircling the Clar Tree to protect it,” Schwab said.

Kent said they’re giving the tree a good buffer zone and stated that they’ve never had any intention of cutting down the Clar Tree.

“It will remain forever on that property,” Kent said.

Despite this and the aforementioned forest resource mitigation measures, there have been over 300 public comments posted to CalFire regarding the THP and many echo Dunlap and Baptie’s concerns.

“There’s a lot of local opposition to this and a lot of local concern, not just about the Clar Tree, but about the increased fire risk that this will present, the increased landslide risk that we think this will present,” Baptie said.

One comment came in the form of a resolution passed by the Sonoma County Democratic Party. The comment was received on Jan. 13, 2021.

The resolution urges CalFire to stop or substantially reduce the logging proposed in the THP.

“The Sonoma County Democratic Party urges CalFire – a public resource agency also responsible for fighting fires that threaten communities — to stop or substantially reduce the logging proposed by the landowner on these hillsides,” the resolution states.

There are many other public comments and the Guerneville Forest Coalition highlighted a few on their website for folks to view.

Each THP has a comment period which begins once the plan is submitted. The pre-harvest inspection also merits a 30-day extended public comment period following the inspection.

Additionally, a final inter-agency review/second review has to occur. The review evaluates the plan up to that point and the public comments.

After the second review the director’s determination period occurs and at that point a director’s designee, Schwab, has 15 working days to determine whether approval of the THP is appropriate. If the designee can’t make a decision in those 15 days, then they have to ask for an extension.

Schwab said they are currently in the director designee determination phase.

Once a second review occurs and if the plan is recommended for approval, the public comment period opens for another 10 days.

“To be clear, we are still evaluating this plan and all of the public comments,” Schwab said.

Kent said they believe they are doing the right thing in terms of long term forest management.

“All (mitigation) measures have been very closely reviewed by all of the state agencies, the regional water quality control board, the department of fish and game, CalFire and the department of mines and geology. It’s been very heavily vetted and we think we’re doing the right think in terms of long-term management,” Kent said.