

# Sequoia plan shifts focus of discussion

Two-day conference now will focus on the national monument idea.

BY LEWIS GRISWOLD  
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President Clinton's request that giant sequoia groves be considered for more federal protection has added a sense of urgency to a major conference about the massive trees.

The two-day symposium for scientists, foresters and the general public is planned for March in Visalia, and is expected to draw about 200 environmentalists, loggers and government officials.

To the consternation of loggers and the delight of environmentalists, Clinton last week directed the United States Department of Agriculture, which oversees the Forest Service, to write a report on the wisdom of creating a 400,000-acre national monument to protect the giants.

The administration's move comes only one month before the long-planned conference sponsored by Sequoia National Forest and the Forest Service.

Tom Henry, giant sequoia specialist at Forest Service headquarters in Porterville, said the focus of the conference will change to reflect the administration's new interest in the trees.

Henry said the conference was to have focused on how best to protect the 37 giant sequoia groves in Sequoia National Forest, which by law manages the public lands for "multiple use," including logging and recreation.

But now it will focus on how best to protect them if they are included within the boundaries of a national monument, a federal designation under which logging isn't ruled out but is less likely to happen.

Please see TREES, Page VW5

## Trees: Focus shifts to proposal creating a national monument

Continued from Page VW1

"A management plan has to be written regardless" of whether the trees are included in a national monument, he said. "Some say it's sacrilegious to put a chain saw into a sequoia forest. Others say we've had 80 years of fire suppression and we must remove some of the trees growing around the giant sequoias."

Henry said the Forest Service wants to combine the public's strongly held view that the groves should be protected from logging with science that shows that trees growing around the giants should be thinned out occasionally.

Henry is one of five Forest Service officials who will write a report about the national monument idea that will go to the secretary of agriculture and, later, to the president.

Two other writers are based in Porterville, and two are in Washington, D.C.

The Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service have two months to write the report.

Giant sequoias grow only in the Sierra Nevada from about Calaveras County to California Hot Springs, and most of the trees are in Tulare County.

The giant sequoia groves in Sequoia National Forest have been the subject of controversy for years.

On one side of the debate are environmentalists who argue the trees should be left alone. On the other side are loggers who want to log around the big trees, but not take the trees themselves.

"I'm hopeful that the best available science is presented at the conference, because the best science suggests that the groves are at risk of a catastrophic fire," said Kent Duysen, manager at Sierra Forest Products in Terra Bella, which logs in Sequoia National Forest. "If we don't do something to protect the groves from fire, we're going to lose the groves." Although the massive trees themselves are no longer logged, the trees around them have been logged until recently.

In the mid-1980s, Porterville resident Carla Cloer sued to stop the logging around them, claiming the logging harmed the sequoia trees and the groves they live in.

She won the battle. The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a lower-court ruling that logging could not occur within 500 feet of the trees.

Cloer said she is "on cloud nine" because of the president's request to consider designating the area as a national monument.

But she's said she distrusts the Forest Service and wonders aloud whether the conference is merely "P.R. dressing" for the Forest Service before it issues a report recommending timber sales from trees removed around the big trees.

She said she may boycott the conference, but hasn't made up her mind.

"This is a world-class forest we have here, so let's protect it," Cloer said.