

Ruling affirms environmental benefits of timber harvest

Timber harvesting under the state's forestry standards is not only appropriate under the law, it also advances the fight against climate change. That's the opinion handed down last week by El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Patrick Riley.

The court said the method used by the state to approve timber harvesting plans by private landowners is valid under California environmental laws. The judge emphasized that the state's forest practices can help improve air quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The decision was made after consideration of a consolidated case in which environmental activists challenged 19 timber harvesting plans in eight counties, submitted to the state by Sierra Pacific Industries.

An environmental group argued that the plans did not comply with the California Environmental Quality Act because they did not properly or adequately address greenhouse gas emissions from timber harvesting.

In his 25-page opinion, Riley disagreed and said the issues raised by the Center for Biological Diversity were without merit. The judge found the timber harvest plans comply with all statutes and regulations governing emissions and sequestrations and comply with all CEQA rules and requirements.

"This is a clear victory for the state's sustainable forest management standards and a clear affirmation that active forest management provides a significant carbon sequestration benefit," said California Forestry Association President David Bischel. "Efforts by activists to stop timber harvesting and force jobs out of rural California by arguing that forestry harms the environment were soundly rejected by the court.

"Forestry is the only economic sector in the state that provides a net carbon sequestration benefit," Bischel said. "Yet taxpayers unwittingly subsidize an endless stream of litigation designed to block it."

The association said the court's ruling means Sierra Pacific and other forestland owners can proceed with forest management activities that provide jobs in rural

California communities hit hard by limitations on logging, and said sustainable lumber supplies will be more readily available to consumers.

"The court's decision highlights SPI's thorough environmental analysis and commitment to sustainable practices," said Sierra Pacific Industries spokesman Mark Pawlicki. "Regulations require we perform a thorough environmental analysis, including the impact of harvest and replanting on greenhouse gas emission. We have complied with those laws."

The Center for Biological Diversity filed eight lawsuits against the state for approving the timber harvest plans, alleging SPI used inadequate methods to analyze the effect of timber harvesting on greenhouse gases.

The state's permitting process requires all forestland owners to include a comprehensive greenhouse gas analysis, the forestry association said, and provide estimates of the potential emissions from timber harvesting and related activities such as equipment operation and transportation.

Pawlicki said SPI has complied with those rules "and demonstrated that sustainable forest management can have a positive effect on reducing carbon emissions and counteract the negative impacts of climate change."

By planting trees after harvest and always growing more wood than is being harvested on its lands, SPI said it has demonstrated that its forestry practices provide a greater carbon sequestration benefit over what would occur naturally or by using less intensive forest-management practices.

Judge Riley also noted that without timber harvesting and milling in California, the state would need to rely on imported lumber for 100 percent of its needs and that such reliance could result in more, not less, harmful emissions.

The court concluded that California-grown wood products provide a wide array of environmental benefits and upheld the validity of the state's forest management laws and regulations.