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Timber! (tenderly)

- Felling trees, but not the forest. How one California logging company cuts and grows in balance.

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CHESTER, CALIF.

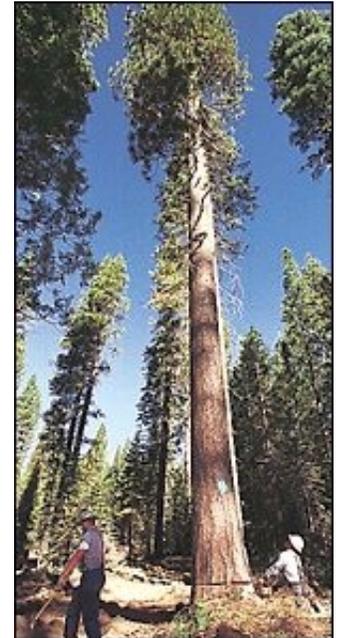
The ponderosa pine stands tall and true, its needled crown towering 140 feet above the forest floor where its been growing ever since native Americans and pioneers fought over this land near Chester, Calif., just after the Civil War.

As he's done many times before, Dave Davidson takes a last look at the predicted line of fall then fires up his chain saw. As the sturdy logger muscles his saw through the pine's 36-inch diameter, the tree begins to lean and then move - slowly at first then faster as he pulls his sputtering machine from the trunk, shouts a warning, and moves quickly away. With an ear-splitting "CRAACK!" and a ground-shaking "THUMP!" the pine falls right where he said it would.

In many parts of the country, such an event would have brought out protesters - perhaps a tree-sitter objecting to the demise of an ancient forest. But in this bit of northern California - the Collins Almanor Forest - environmentalists point to commercial logging as an example of how to do things right, preserving natural habitat and biodiversity while providing family-wage jobs for loggers and mill workers.

The 94,000-acre mixed-conifer forest here is owned by the Collins Pine Co., a family business that dates back to the mid-19th century when young Truman Doud Collins started lumbering back in Pennsylvania. In the early 1900s, Truman's son Everell began acquiring timberland in northern California.

When logging on the Collins Almanor Forest began here nearly 60 years ago, there were 1.5 billion board feet of standing timber on the forest. (A board-foot is a unit of volume 12 inches wide by 12 inches long by one inch thick.) Since then, 2 billion board feet have been felled and run through the company's mill in nearby Chester, Calif. - enough to build about 150,000 average-size homes.



Yet the volume of standing timber today remains what it was when loggers first entered the forest in 1941 - 1.5 billion board feet - including many trees that are well over 100 years old. There's not a clear-cut in sight. Wildlife thrive here, including a number of endangered species. Compared with most industrial timberland around the country, this is a real forest in most respects - to the untrained eye not much different from nearby Mt. Lassen National Park.

"In terms of their forestry practices on the ground, I would liken them to the Cadillac of private forestry when everybody else is driving around in a Volkswagen," says Dominick DellaSala, a forest ecologist with the World Wildlife Fund.

"They are growing saw logs and they are managing saw logs sustainably - that means forgoing clear-cutting and not just taking down all the big trees," says Dr. DellaSala. "And they are doing it at a rate that can sustain that big-tree component when their neighbors are on much shorter rotation cycles and are greatly contributing to habitat fragmentation problems and the loss of the big trees."

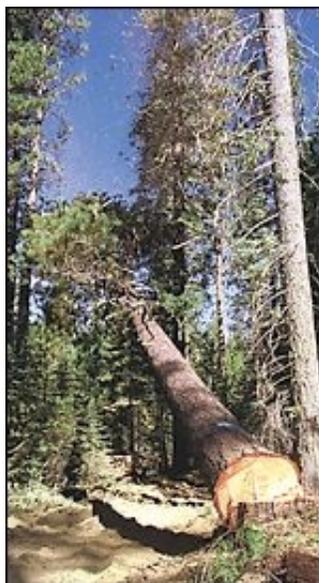
For years, the "war in the woods" across the West, symbolized by spotted owls, salmon, and other dwindling species, has pitted conservationists against loggers. Court-ordered restrictions on tree cutting have led to the shutting down of many mills, impacting rural communities at a time when the Old West of logging, mining, and ranching is being crowded out by the New West of retirees, recreationists, and high-tech professional transplants fleeing urban areas. Massive fires this summer and the political fight over "salvage" logging have intensified the debate.

Against this backdrop, big timber companies and the United States Forest Service are facing tough questions about their historical means of operation - industrial forestry that relies heavily on big clear-cuts and treating trees as if they were an even-age crop like corn. Criticism comes not only from activists, but from a public that has developed a decidedly more environmental ethic in recent years.

This has brought increased attention - particularly from those working to preserve the country's remaining old-growth trees, some of whom see Collins Pine as a model for logging public and private forests.



FROM 140 FEET TO GROUND ZERO: Cutter David Davidson falls a 130-year-old ponderosa pine, which represents the two billionth board-foot of timber the Collins Pine Co. has produced on its 94,000-acre forest in Chester, Calif. PHOTOS BY ROBERT HARBISON - STAFF



Roy Keene, who heads a consulting and advocacy organization in Eugene, Ore., called Public Interest Forestry, was one of the experts who examined the Collins Almanor Forest in 1993. That's when it became the first privately owned timberland in the country to be certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an international, independent organization based in Mexico.

"I have to tell you, they came out with flying colors," says Mr. Keene, a logger-turned-environmentalist who has often been an outspoken critic of government and corporate forest practices. "I also have to tell you that there's very few other industrial forests of that size and scale that would even come close."

On a scale of zero to 100, the FSC scored the Collins Almanor Forest in the respectable 80s in three categories: (1) timber resource sustainability, (2) forest ecosystem maintenance, and (3) socio-economic benefits to the local community. In its 1998 five-year reevaluation, Collins Almanor scored in the 90s in all three categories.

Over the years, the company also has received awards from Green Cross International (the Switzerland-based organization headed by Mikhail Gorbachev, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize), as well as a Presidential Award for Sustainable Development, presented at the White House.

In the small town of Chester (population, 2,200), the Collins mill employs about 200 people. The company supports many civic activities. It also awards college scholarships of \$2,400 a year to any Chester High School graduate who maintains a B average. Individual scholarships continue annually through undergraduate and graduate study for up to 10 years.

When Everell Collins passed on in 1940, he left half of his ownership in the Collins Almanor Forest to the Board of Foreign Missions of the United Methodist Church. Since then, the forest has brought more than \$60 million to the church's missionary operations while providing tax revenues and a steady payroll.

Today, that same modest spirit of community service and environmental stewardship marks the Collins family business.

"I'm very proud of how the forest looks after all these years," Maribeth Collins said at a recent ceremony here marking the two-billionth board foot of timber harvested by the company.



STILL STANDING: The volume of standing timber today remains what it was when loggers first entered Collins Almanor Forest in 1941. NASA



ALL WOOD ALL THE TIME: Brian Campbell checks logs with a metal detector. A nail in a log can destroy a saw blade.



BAND SAW: Freshly cut trees roll through the mill in Chester, Calif.

Bouncing through the dirt roads in his company pickup, Collins forester Barry Ford ticks off some of the wildlife species here: bald eagle, bobcat, osprey, pileated woodpecker, wolverine, cougar, black bear, beaver, and spotted owl. He points to the "large woody debris" left on the ground - logs and limbs that are home to the mice, moles, and voles that feed larger animals - and to the standing snags with nesting cavities for woodpeckers and owls.

Mr. Ford oversees restoration of stream banks, some of which have fences to keep out the free-range cattle roaming through in the summer. Chinook salmon and steelhead trout spawn here in two creeks, the last major undammed tributaries in the Sacramento/San Joaquin River system.

"All parts of the land base are connected," he says. "It's all part of the ecosystem."

Ever since the 1940s, the company has carefully monitored more than 500 one-acre plots of land here, keeping close track of tree growth and other indicators of forest health. Loggers move through the whole forest on a 15-year cutting cycle, selecting some trees to cut and leaving others.



More than 150,000 homes have been built with timber cut by the Collins Pine Co.

"Some areas we skip, others we hit a little bit harder," says Ford, whose daughter took advantage of the company's scholarship program to become a veterinarian.

In addition to producing lumber and other forest products, the company owns and manages a hardwood forest in Pennsylvania and a conifer forest on the Oregon-California border. Both have been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council. In all, the company has 293,000 acres of certified forest. Certification - particularly if it is done independently and not by industry-controlled groups - is becoming more and more important as consumers seek out environmentally friendly products. But the pressures of the marketplace exist for a privately held company like Collins just as they do for larger companies answerable to profit-hungry investors and impatient stockholders.

This is especially true in a business where growth (both financially and in terms of the natural resource) is measured in decades instead of in three-month quarters.

"Nothing is perfect," says DellaSala, the **World Wildlife Fund forest ecologist**. He'd like to see the company leave even more standing big trees and fallen logs on the ground, both to enrich the soil and to provide wildlife habitat.



Roy Keene, the forestry consultant, agrees. He's concerned that mill officials, under pressure to produce wood products, have too much say in how fast to cut. "I was in the Collins Almanor Forest last spring," says Mr. Keene. "I could see the stronger hand - more of the older, larger pines taken out of the stands. Over time, how sustainable is that? The real truth comes out 20, 30, 40 years down the road."

Still, he adds, "Even today, they're so far ahead that not only are the other guys not on the bandwagon, they're not in the parade by comparison."
