

Virtual open house will cover historic Stanislaus National Forest project

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The Forest Service is planning an online open house meeting at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday to highlight how the agency is seeking public input on a draft environmental impact statement for the largest green forest management project in the 124-year history of the Stanislaus National Forest.

The project is planned on an area that totals 118,808 acres of public and private lands that include 94,823 acres in Forest Service jurisdiction, said Katie Wilkinson, a project team leader and environmental coordinator for the Stanislaus National Forest.

The project is backed by diverse stakeholders, including loggers and conservationists from the collaborative group Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions. It's intended to reduce fuels, further improve forest health, and avoid future megablazes like the 2015 Butte Fire and the 2013 Rim Fire in the overgrown Middle Fork and South Fork Stanislaus watersheds.

It has taken two years of planning so far. People have until 9 p.m. Jan. 24 to submit their views on the project DEIS.

Partners include Sierra Pacific Industries, the Tuolumne River Trust, and the Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center in Twain Harte.

The Forest Service bills the plan as an opportunity for environmentalists, foresters, biomass proponents, and traditional timber industry advocates to work together to confront overgrowth and density in the drought-sickened, beetle-vulnerable Stanislaus National Forest. The goal is to create a patchwork of treated and untreated segments of forest, similar to the Stanislaus-Tuolumne Experimental Forest near Pinecrest.

The Stanislaus-Tuolumne Experimental Forest is one of the first areas to undergo variable density treatments, a strategy that is part of the big new project. Adam Rich, a wildlife biologist with the Stanislaus National Forest, described variable density treatments as "cutting edge research" in June 2020.

The Stanislaus-Tuolumne Experimental Forest covers about 1,500 acres and it was formally created in December 1943. Research in the area has been ongoing since the 1920s. Recently in the experimental forest, researcher Eric Knapp looked at insect and drought tree mortality in various treatments. He found variable density thinning units had significantly less tree mortality. In addition, spotted owl territories there have been monitored and owls continue to successfully breed and raise young in the experimental forest.

The online open house Wednesday will be staged on Microsoft Teams. The Forest Service provided the following link, <https://teams.microsoft.com/dl/launcher/500.html>, to join the open house.

Participants in the online open house can expect Forest Supervisor Jason Kuiken and members of the project team to start with a brief overview of the project's proposed actions and action alternatives, followed by a question-and-answer period.

The project DEIS offers proposals that include forest thinning, fuel reduction, prescribed fire, fuelbreak maintenance and construction, salvage, hazard tree abatement, temporary road construction, invasive weed control and eradication, and other plans to incorporate the management approaches and conservation measures presented in the 2019 Conservation Strategy for the California spotted owl in the Sierra Nevada.

"We encourage anyone interested in the project to join us during the virtual public open house," Wilkinson said in an announcement distributed Monday. "You can speak directly with the SERAL team, learn more about what is being proposed, and ask any questions you may have. We look forward to the opportunity to engage with those interested and to encourage participation in the planning process."

Public comments received by Jan. 24 will be responded to in writing, and the comments will also be used to update and modify a final environmental impact statement for the project. Anybody who

submitted specific written comments during the DEIS comment period will have opportunities to object to the final EIS and draft record of decision when it is released.

The online open house meeting will be recorded and posted on the project website sometime after the conclusion of the meeting.

The proposed project is the largest green forest management to date up and down the entire, 400-mile-long Sierra Nevada range. The Stanislaus National Forest was created by Congress in February 1897. Today it covers 1,403 square miles in Alpine, Calaveras, Tuolumne, and Mariposa counties, including 42% of all the land in Tuolumne County.

Source:https://www.uniondemocrat.com/news/article_9b53839e-6dac-11ec-bff3-97f6f85227be.html