

Santa Cruz Sentinel Editorial: Sensible Decision

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LOGGING: There are still plenty of controls on how logging proceeds in the Santa Cruz Mountains

Here's how local logger and environmentalist Bud McCrary sees the logging issue in Santa Cruz County: "If anybody takes a look at what we do, they'll see we practice the best forestry in the world."

McCrary is among those who successfully challenged a lower-court ruling that had previously allowed the county to place stricter controls on logging locally than anywhere else in the state.

The ruling may yet be appealed further. But for now, the decision means logging rules will essentially remain uniform statewide.

The county and local environmentalists had attempted to put into place zoning regulations that clamped down on most local timber projects.

This decision brings up two issues. The first is a procedural one: Should Santa Cruz County timber operations be forced to operate under different rules here than in the rest of the state? The county might argue with that perception. Its lawyers have argued that zoning regulations are a local matter and don't regulate timber operations per se.

That argument is disingenuous. Yes, the county only decides where logging can take place - but that's enough to shut down most operations.

That brings up the second issue: timber harvesting itself. Right now, because local logging has been so limited, many forests are overgrown. Virtually all these forests consist of second-growth trees - and there are many more of these than originally stood in the virgin, first-growth forest.

The health of the forests are actually helped by good logging practices. For example, McCrary points out that recent research shows local trout grow bigger and are healthier in areas where more sunlight can reach mountain streams. Overly thick forests actually can harm the wildlife.

What's overlooked in this debate is that statewide logging regulations are already stringent. There's adequate protection without the county's meddling. Forest practice rules are enforced by both the state Department of Forestry and by the

Department of Fish and Game. As McCrary says, "Anyone who complies with the law is doing a good job."

It's time to open back up local lands for timber harvesting. It can be done sensitively, and the irony is that most folks would have no idea that logging had occurred.

Timber operations are an important source of revenue for landowners trying to hold onto their open land - and a potentially important source of revenue for the county.

Unfortunately, the county has spent a lot of money defending unreasonable rules controlling logging operations. We hope that county officials and those pursuing overly stringent zoning regulations can drop the challenge and realize that there's adequate protection in current state law.