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Forest marks 100 years

Managers must balance interests of people, land

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When managers of the Cleveland National Forest tried to limit access at four sites last year to protect nesting raptors, rock climbers protested, saying they would be locked out of areas popular for their sport.

The strong opposition – some of it rallied from climbers across the country – surprised the U.S. Forest Service. Officials retreated and have yet to adopt a plan for balancing the interests of birds and climbers.

It's the kind of conflict that has become increasingly common and intense as once-remote federal lands are besieged by growing numbers of users.

PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune
Christine Robancho (center) of Chula Vista, son Everett Bagaporo, 5, and daughter Autumn Bagaporo (right), 7, explored Little Laguna Meadow.

Besides climbers and wildlife advocates, the Forest Service must juggle demands from telecommunications companies, hunters and campers, utilities, off-road-vehicle enthusiasts, hikers, horse riders, neighbors and others. The forest offers attractions in every season, including winter snows that draw carloads of visitors to its mountains.

“We are getting pressure from all sides,” said Cleveland National Forest Supervisor Will Metz. “It's so divisive and it's so emotional.”

The forest marks its centennial Tuesday. Opinions vary about how those who manage its 438,000 acres of open space in San Diego, Riverside and Orange counties are performing.

Some users said officials are willing to work with them. Others said the managers lack commitment to helping endangered species rebound. Still others said the agency's staff is ambivalent about making sure people can enjoy the public's land.

Another compounding factor is population growth. About 10 million people live within an hour's drive of the three districts that make up the Cleveland National Forest.

“The biggest difference is what's happening around the forest. . . . More people are moving in,” said Tom White, a land management planner who started working at the forest in the late 1970s.

This closeness compels the Forest Service to devote ever-larger chunks of its budget to prevent fires –

natural and man-made – from spreading beyond the forest into residential communities.

Forest Service spending on fire suppression has jumped from $179 million in 1997 to $1.4 billion last year. Fire control accounts for roughly half of the Forest Service's spending nationally and an even higher percentage locally.

Forests as water source

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, San Diego boosters and businessmen such as John D. Spreckels supported the creation of a national forest as a way to preserve the city's main source of water – the vast, undeveloped lands to the east that fed the San Diego River and other waterways.

They hoped the U.S. Forest Service would prevent overgrazing and control fires so the land wouldn't become denuded and vulnerable to erosion.

Others in the county also welcomed the Forest Service, which was formed in 1905 to restore and then manage timber and grasslands that had been plucked bare during the country's westward expansion.

But pioneer ranchers opposed the idea of a national forest. Rural residents in San Diego County and across the West feared that rule-making, badge-bearing federal officials would limit their access to lands where they had enjoyed free rein.

On July 2, 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt combined existing forest reserves to create the Cleveland National Forest. His order was retroactive to July 1.

The forest was named after President Cleveland, an early promoter of federal forest protection, who had died June 24.

Cleveland signed the 1897 proclamation to create the San Jacinto Forest Reserve, between San Gorgonio Pass and the border with Mexico.

About renaming the reserve, Roosevelt wrote to Cleveland's wife, “It seemed to me eminently fitting that one of the forests which he created should bear his name throughout all time.”

The land was to be protected, but Congress also said national forests were for multiple uses, including logging and mining.

“That sort of split is one that often people don't understand. . . . There has always been sort of a struggle” between competing uses, said Jim Newland, a San Diego historian and author of a new book about the Cleveland National Forest.

Unlike forests in the Sierra Nevada, Rockies and Cascades, the Cleveland forest never had major timber operations, partly because it has relatively few large trees. It's dominated by shrubs of the chaparral ecosystem – dubbed the “elfin forest” – that have little economic value.

“The reality is that these forests (in Southern California) get more visits than most other forests, so the demand for recreation and use is much higher,” Newland said.

People make about 850,000 visits a year to the Cleveland National Forest, and their mix of recreational activities is far more complex than it was a few decades ago.

“It's a pressure release from the really mechanistic and stressful society that we live in,” said Geoffrey Smith of Mira Mesa, a consultant for local nonprofit groups who has hiked and camped in the forest over the decades.

Fragmentation and fires

Beyond the impact from recreational activities, the forest's proximity to populated areas has increased demands for roads, power lines, communication towers and other urban infrastructure to be put in the forest.

Cleveland managers call those items “special uses.” Roughly one-quarter of all the special-use permits issued for national forests are for Cleveland and its three sister forests in Southern California – the Los Padres, Angeles and San Bernardino national forests, said Gloria Silva, a planner at the Cleveland forest headquarters in Rancho Bernardo.

To complicate matters, the Cleveland forest's 438,000 acres are split into three major islands, which are further broken up by roughly 133,000 acres of private “in-holdings” left over from the early days when settlers snatched the best lands.

“The fragmentation of the landscape is one of my top . . . concerns,” Metz said.

That's partly because fragmentation makes firefighting tougher.

In 1970, the Laguna fire scorched about 175,000 acres – the largest blaze in California's recorded history at the time. About two-thirds of the burned area was in the Cleveland National Forest.

Major wildfires again scorched parts of the forest and surrounding communities in 2003 and 2007. Cleveland officials worry that the forest remains vulnerable to fire because of ongoing drought conditions and bark-beetle infestations.

“What it means is that the agency is going to fight those flames in Poway or it's going to maintain trail heads and hire enough rangers to make sure that visitors have a safe and secure experience. It can't do both,” said Char Miller, a forest historian at Pomona College in Claremont.

With their focus on fire suppression, Cleveland forest officials said they're spending less money on some nonfire programs, including raptor monitoring, as they try to reconcile the competing interests of groups such as preservationists and rock climbers.

Forest supervisor Metz is seeking help from an agency that specializes in resolving environmental arguments. The idea is for mediators to talk with interest groups and try to craft a solution that all sides can accept. Previously, the Forest Service would announce a set of alternatives, solicit written comments and issue a ruling that often ended in litigation.

Metz concedes that his approach might not work, but he said it's worth the effort to try to avoid lawsuits and closing sections of the forest.

“It's a gentler, kinder type of management strategy,” he said.

Miller said collaborative, community-based forestry – like Metz's approach – is the new model for a Forest Service uncertain about its role.

“They really don't know who they are,” Miller said. “Should they cut more timber? Should they pursue biodiversity? Or should they offer more recreational opportunities? Each (alternative) comes with a financial cost, and in a society that is unwilling to tax itself, it's not clear what any public-lands agency should do.”

Values at odds

Interest groups that deal with the forest's managers agree about the lack of staffing and money for forest operations, but they disagree about how forest managers are handling the shortcomings.

Some environmentalists are considering a lawsuit to challenge recent land management plans for Southern California's four national forests.

The Forest Service “provides an increasingly rare wild refuge for imperiled plants and animals in a growing sea of urban development. Yet (it) ignores these values and treats most of this land as if it were worthy only of development for urban infrastructure, noxious motor recreation and other exploitation,” said David Hogan, conservation manager in San Diego for the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit environmental group.

Some outdoors enthusiasts see the opposite problem.

“At every opportunity that I am aware of . . . it seems like it's moving toward less access instead of more,” said Jack Bransford, president of the San Diego County Wildlife Federation, which represents several hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation groups.

He said the Forest Service suffers from hiring too many academics who don't know the land and have little interest in rods and guns.

“When I was a youngster, a guy who was a forester or a game warden was one of us . . . a woodsman, someone we could identify with,” he said.

Some critics, however, praised forest officials for trying to find common ground.

“They are really seeking to reach out to the various user groups that depend on the forest for recreation,” said John Stewart, a resource consultant for the California Association of 4 Wheel Drive Clubs.

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