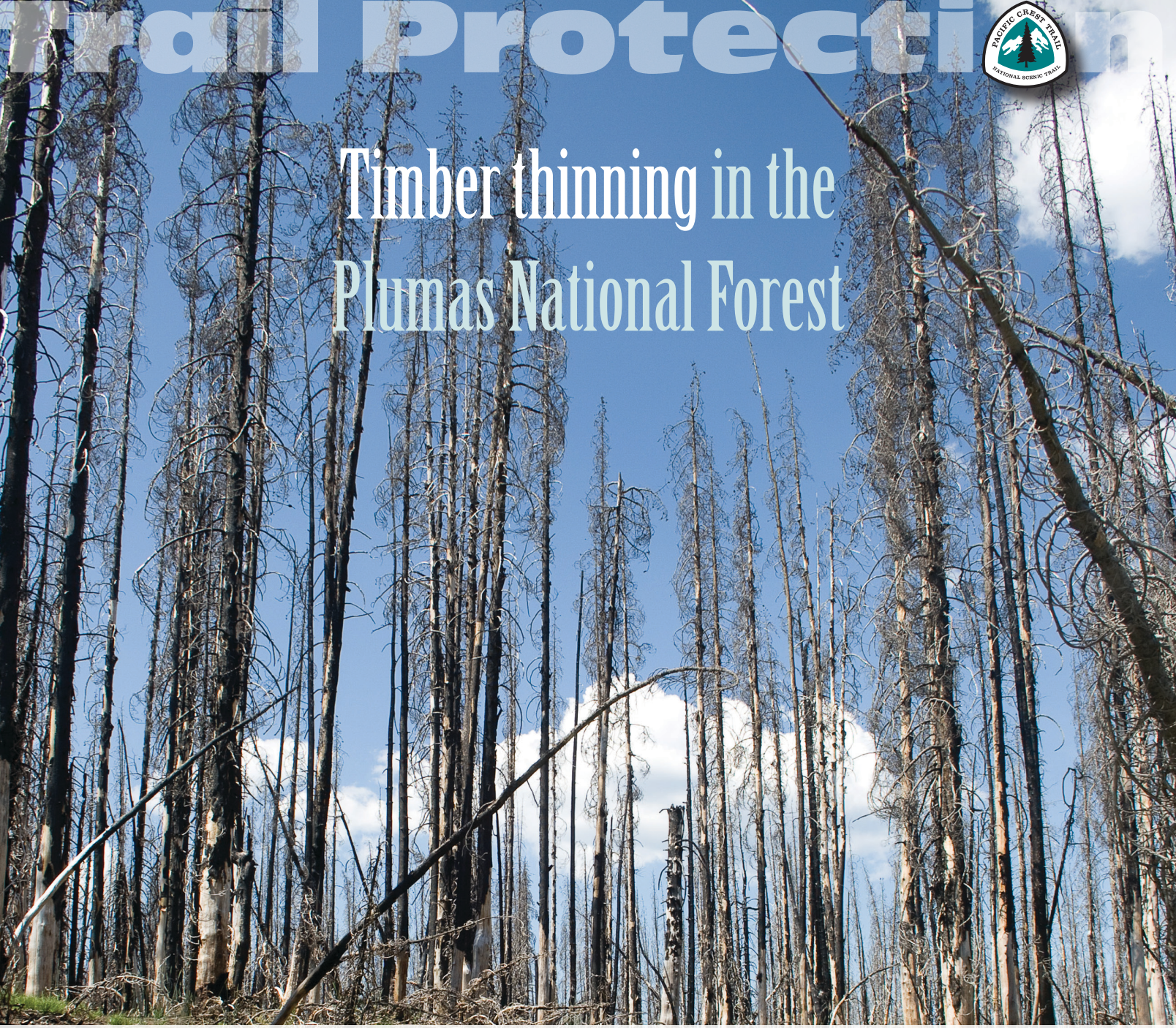
Timber thinning in the Plumas National Forest



By **Justin Kooyman**, PCTA Regional Representative

Most of the northern Sierra Nevada forests are considered to be dense, overstocked and filled with unhealthy stands of trees.

So I wasn't surprised when I came across the Bucks Project in June as I was reading through a list of projects proposed by the Mount Hough Ranger District. The Bucks project was described as a fuels reduction timber-thinning project.

During the California Gold Rush, much of the Sierra was logged to feed the need for timber to build growing communities and infrastructure. After World War II, timber production rose dramatically through clear-cutting. Fire also affected much of the landscape. Some of those areas were turned into tree plantations.

Fires historically cleared forest underbrush and small trees, providing nutrients for larger trees and promoting healthy growth as part of the natural cycle. But early forest management and decades of fire suppression have created unhealthy, dense forests. Weaker trees have not been thinned out through the natural fire patterns. Not only are theses forests less healthy, the large amount of fuel – dead and decaying wood materials – can feed larger catastrophic fires.

The land encompassing the Bucks Project in the vicinity of the PCT was burned and replanted with Jeffrey Pines. After decades of fire suppression, this stand falls into the unhealthy condition described above.

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A burn area near Crater Lake, Ore. Photo by Ryan Weidert

Timber thinning in the Plumas National Forest *continued from inside front cover*

The immediate goals of the project are to reduce high fuel loads and protect against catastrophic fires, thereby protecting private homes and public amenities such as trails and campgrounds.

Long-term goals for the forest are to reintroduce fire to the ecosystem, improve watershed health and enhance wildlife habitat, improving the overall health of the forest.

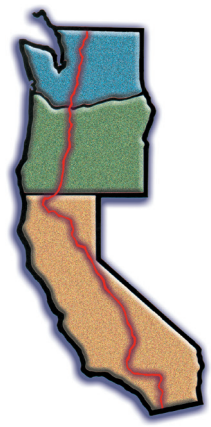
In my initial discussion with the Mt. Hough Ranger District staff we discussed the potential effect the timber thinning might have on the PCT. About a quarter mile of the trail crosses the timber-thinning area.

Unfortunately, the original map illustrating the project did not include the location of the PCT. I shared my concern with forest managers that, because of this oversight, the public and PCTA had not been given ample opportunity to comment on the project.

District Ranger **Michael Donald** took this feedback to heart and decided to re-scope the project. The public comment period was extended, an updated thinning plan addressed the PCTA's concerns, and the PCT was included in an updated map.

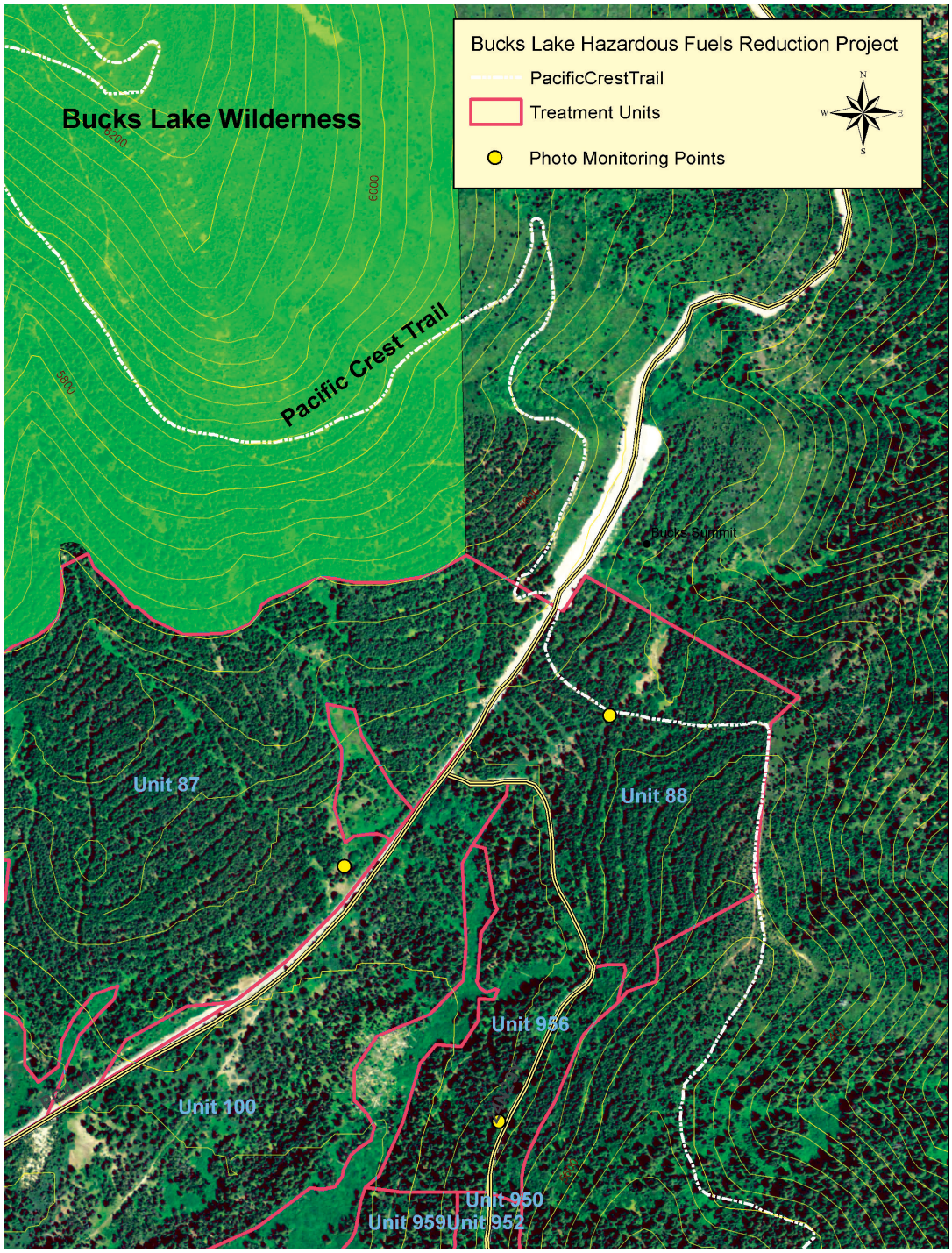
Plumas National Forest staff members and I visited the area and discussed the proposed thinning and the effect it would have on the PCT. At first we struggled to find common ground. At issue was the use of heavy equipment adjacent to the trail and 10 acres of thinning that would require skidding across the PCT. The District Ranger and **Forest Service** specialists representing recreation, logging systems and fire ecology worked to balance the need for treatment with the protection of the trail. During this process we discussed and debated a number of potential solutions or compromises. It seemed PCTA and the forest managers were on the same page.

Initially the plan was to cross the trail at three locations to access 10 acres on the northeast corner of the unit. This quickly became the most controversial aspect of the project between the PCTA and the Plumas National Forest staff. While we understood the rationale for thinning the 10 acres for the sake of a healthy forest and a more natural stand in the vicinity of the PCT, we believed the damage to the PCT would be too great.



The PCTA Mission

The mission of the Pacific Crest Trail Association is to protect, preserve and promote the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail as an internationally significant resource for the enjoyment of hikers and equestrians, and for the value that wild and scenic lands provide to all people.



Previous page: *A stretch of the trail as it winds through the Plumas National Forest.*

This page: *A map of the affected area.*

This debate led to additional meetings, more field visits and countless emails to discuss how to protect the PCT while still achieving goals set out by the forest managers, which PCTA supported.

Our collaborative relationship led to significant protections for the PCT during the Bucks project. According to the final environmental assessment:

> "The thinning of this unnatural landscape would have long-term benefits to the recreation experience and visual quality along the trail. This project would create a more open stand with healthier trees, which encourages natural regeneration of diverse species and reduces the potential for catastrophic fire."

After considering PCTA's concerns, the District Ranger decided to include mitigation measures. A 70-foot buffer along the trail will exclude the use of heavy machinery and allow hand felling of trees up to 8 inches in diameter. This will reduce visual impacts to trail users. All trees will be felled away from the trail. Only one skid trail will cross the trail at a natural opening. All other skid trails will be 100 feet from the trail. Once the project is complete, ripping and de-compacting the trail tread will restore the trail and any damaged native vegetation will be replanted. Any damaged trail tread will be rebuilt.

This project is a good example of how timber thinning and other forest management projects along the PCT can be successful and protect the trail. More importantly, it proves the value of our partnerships with the U.S. Forest Service and other forest managers.

Not only will this project reduce fire risks, it will restore the forest to a more natural condition thereby improving the long-term recreation experiences for hikers and equestrians. I will continue to monitor this project to see how the environment responds and to ensure the protection of the PCT in partnership with the Mt. Hough Ranger District staff.