

A recent dispute over protections to an old-growth redwood tree in Lower Redway, California has once again invigorated scrutiny towards hazard tree designations, their justifications, and the uses to which they are put.

In late 2025 Robert Scarlett, a mid-twenties local boy and CalFire employee, bought a .43 acre residential property in Redway, CA with a house, a shed, and a handful of large redwood trees on it. The presence of mature and old-growth redwoods is typical of the area situated along the South Fork Eel River in southern Humboldt county, which have long been protected by county zoning ordinance 2112. The qualified zoning area, or "Q-zone", requires that a special permit be obtained from the county to remove any redwoods over one foot in diameter, and the criteria for removal is clearly stated as immanent danger of the tree itself falling. And yet, in January 2026 timber operators contracted by Scarlett arrived to the residential parcel and within a week four redwoods ranging from 6 to 8 ft in diameter were gone forever.

One lone old-growth redwood intended for removal by Scarlett remains on the property, around which passionate community opposition to the logging coalesced. Many residents of the area are outraged by the removal of the trees that have already been cut and by the outstanding threat to the remaining tree, which they see as a clear violation of long-standing and hard-fought protections. In the 1990s the region was a hotbed of environmental activism and forest defense, organized largely between Earth First! and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and in which many current county residents participated. The protections in the current Q-zone ordinance were codified in 1996, following many years of effort in defense of these magnificent and ecologically essential trees.

Scarlett had not obtained a special permit from the county. Instead he had submitted an application for an exemption to CalFire, claiming the trees were "hazardous" after what

appears to have been a cursory visual inspection by fellow CalFire employee and forester Lucas Titus, which was granted within 24 hrs. Officials at the county planning commission then allowed him to move forward, stating that they had believed CalFire trumped their jurisdiction. They cited a 2020 redwood removal case they had attempted to intervene in, and had been summarily shut down by CalFire and the County Forest Review Committee.

The remaining old-growth tree is nearly 12 ft wide, over 250 ft tall, and estimated to be at least 350 years old. It is located on a small residential property immediately adjacent to a public road, power lines, and neighboring residential properties as well as the home on Scarlett's parcel. As such, special measures needed to be taken to cut it. It had to be scaled by climbers and limbed all the way up before being dropped in forty-foot chunks from the top, and it was during this process that a fortuitous error produced the delay that allowed the tree to be spared long enough for community action to garner it a further stay-of-execution.

A climber dropped a limb on the power lines below and caused a power outage, which stopped work. According to Sue Maloney, a Redway resident and longtime forest activist, neighbors came out and yelled at the workers, leading to the LTO, or licensed timber operator, to quit the job. By the time Scarlett hired a new LTO and work resumed, Maloney and several other community members were ready to make a stand.

On a Thursday in late April, a small number of protesters gathered. They brought signs reading "STOP LOGGING OLD-GROWTH", "SAVE THE Q-ZONE", and "STOP GREED", and they stood as close as they could get to the threatened tree, putting their bodies in the way of the cut slated for that day. As the day wore on more locals joined the protest, eventually swelling to several dozen people. The California Highway Patrol came out, and a three-way standoff between loggers, protesters, and law enforcement dragged on for most of the

day. Finally, in the late afternoon county officials and the CHP told Scarlett that the cut posed a danger to passing motorists on Briceland Road bordering his property and that he would need to apply for an encroachment permit to temporarily close the road in order to continue.

During this second temporary reprieve the local Old Growth Neighborhood Association took action to get the word out and hundreds upon hundreds of letters and emails voicing concern and outrage poured in to the county planning office. This massive influx of attention and concern is what finally prompted county officials to actually check the pertinent state codes regarding jurisdiction. They found that state agencies were in fact bound to follow local county ordinances after all, and belatedly put a halt to Scarlett's attempted CalFire-assisted end-run around the Q-zone. Scarlett would, in the end, have to apply for a special permit from the county, which would be decided at a public meeting of the county planning commission in June. For this application he hired Registered Professional Forester (RPF) Steve Hohman to make a report, who Maloney called "a known good-old-boy".

In the course of this interval the community continued to organize; they sent out press-releases, did interviews on local radio, solicited further comments and emails from the public be sent to the county, and got a drone operator to take aerial footage of the tree for their own registered professional foresters (RPFs) to analyze.

The public meeting took place on the evening of Thursday, June 18th, and dozens of area residents turned out to give testimony during the public comment section. Of the more than two dozen comments given by community members all but one urged the commission to deny the permit. They cited a wide variety of concerns; some spoke of the scant proportion of the areas original old-growth forests still alive and extant (less than 5%) and of the spiritual and ecological importance of these

trees; others expressed distrust of Scarlett and the planning commission, voicing suspicions that the process had been corrupted by greed and cronyism and that Scarlett's true underlying motivations were simply to reap a windfall from the sale of the timber. RPF Pat Mulligan claimed that he believed Scarlett had gone "expert shopping" to find an arborist who would give him the desired outcome. He also disputed Hohman's claims of significant trunk rot and root damage to the tree, stating that there wasn't any solid evidence for either claim.

Scarlett admitted to the commission that he knew about the Q-zone, and emphasized concern that branches falling from the tree might damage the house or pose a threat to his mother, who he had bought it for. He did not offer an explanation as to why he had not pursued limbing of the tree rather than removal. His lawyer, Tonya Farmer, insisted that he had followed the legal process as it had been explained to him by county planning commission staff. She also made disparaging remarks about some of the community members who gave testimony and expressed resentment towards the very existence of the Q-zone, saying that without it "my client wouldn't have had to go through any of this."

In the end the planning commission voted unanimously to deny the special permit. They cited a lack of compelling evidence that the tree posed an imminent threat, and advised Scarlett to pursue limbing instead. While the ancient redwood tree is safe for now, Scarlett may appeal the decision to the Board of Supervisors, or re-apply for the permit at a future date. The Q-zone ordinance itself is also up for updating and revision by Humboldt County, with the stated purpose of strengthening and clarifying it. It seems likely that the community activated by this recent threat will stay vigilant and engaged throughout this process.

This case in southern Humboldt County has not been the only attempt to abuse or manipulate hazard tree designations in the PNW in recent years. Following the Holiday Farm, Beachie

Creek, and Lyon's Head fires in 2020 in Oregon, the Forest Service proposed logging along over 400 miles of roads (or 20,000 acres) in the Willamette National Forest. They claimed that the trees included in the plan were all categorically hazardous and posed a safety risk to the public. They used this justification to attempt to bypass environmental review under the NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process by invoking a "categorical exclusion". The plan entailed basically clear-cutting 200 ft in from any roads within the official fire boundaries regardless of burn severity or the actual condition of the trees.

Three environmental groups sued to stop the project on the basis of major impacts to water quality and wildlife habitat as a result of the project and that it was therefore unsuitable for a categorical exclusion and required thorough environmental review. The lawsuit, mounted by Cascadia Wildlands in cooperation with Oregon Wild and Willamette Riverkeeper, also alleged that rather than simply targeting genuinely hazardous trees that the project was really large-scale commercial salvage logging in disguise.

U.S. District Judge Michael McShane agreed, and issued an injunction to stop the logging just days before it was scheduled to begin in November 2021, ordering that only trees posing an immanent danger be selectively targeted and that the Forest Service complete the full NEPA process including an environmental assessment and an EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) before the project could proceed. In early 2022 the Forest Service withdrew the plan entirely.

In the Malheur National Forest in eastern Oregon there have been multiple incidences of the commercial logging of old-growth trees done under the aegis or post-hoc justification of hazard tree removal in the last several years. Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project (BMBP), a small forest-defense nonprofit, has opposed and documented these appalling acts of profit-motivated ecological destruction. Old growth trees in eastern

Oregon are vital to fire-resilience, ecological structure and connectivity, increased drought-tolerance and moisture retention, increased flood-resilience, critical habitat value, and also serve as focal points in mycorrhizal communication networks. In addition to all this, an extensive scientific study conducted across all six east-side national forests in Oregon and published in late 2020 found that old growth trees account for a hugely disproportionate level of above-ground carbon storage. Globally the largest 1% of trees account for roughly 50% of carbonaceous biomass; in the U.S. it comes in a bit lower at around 30% due to intense and widespread logging over the last 150 years. *A single large tree can add as much stored carbon to a forest in one year as is contained in a mid-size tree of the same species.*

And yet, in spite of their clear ecological importance and vital role in buffering the existentially disastrous effects of climate change, the Forest Service continues to look for excuses to allow timber interests to slaughter and harvest as many of these ancient and magnificent beings as they can get away with. Since 2020 they have done exactly this in the Camp Lick, Big Mosquito, and Walton Lake timber sales, all done at least ostensibly in the name of hazard-tree mitigation. In east-side National Forests trees upward of 21" diameter should have some level of nominal legal protections, but while such trees presently compose only 3% of east-side national forests these protections have been significantly weakened in the last 6 years. This has greatly reduced the ability of groups like BMBP to successfully challenge these sales and practices on legal grounds.

In 2020 and 2021 I went with Paula Hood, Co-director of BMBP, to the Malheur and helped investigate and document a number of particularly brazen and egregious examples in the Big Mosquito and Camp Lick timber sales. In the course of doing these post-logging surveys we found numerous units in which large trees had been felled and sold. The worst by far that we observed

was in unit 70 of the Big Mosquito sale which was situated on a steep slope below a road and above a perennial stream, where we documented the fresh stumps of over 30 large ponderosa pine trees. We counted the growth rings, and found that they had ranged in age from around 150 years to over 330 years old.

The Big Mosquito sale had been touted by the Forest Service and timber interest groups as a model for restorative logging, sold as a project designed to preserve and protect old and large ponderosa pines. The truth we discovered on-the-ground was tragically and grossly contrary to this claim. We returned to the unit the following season along with the east-side representative for Oregon Wild to try to get some answers regarding why these trees had been allowed to be logged. Several high ranking Forest Service district staff met us in the field and proceeded to shuffle their feet and abashedly attempt to feed us the approved party line.

They maintained that the logging of unit 70 was in line with their overall restoration goals, and stated that while large ponderosa pines were not intended to be targeted in the logging of this sale, that they reserved the discretion to allow large trees to be cut and sold during the implementation of the sale. These particular trees had all been *hazard trees*, they declaimed. All 30-plus of them.

I was a little confused about this, as the unit was well away from any main roads or recreation areas commonly frequented by the public, and sought some clarification on this point. "A hazard to who?" I asked.

"To the loggers," they replied. They said that each of the trees in question had been individually approved for removal (and sale) by the recently retired former timber manager for the district, and no we couldn't see any documentation of this because none existed, and never had, and wasn't required to anyway. There was zero public transparency regarding actual large-tree logging practices for the sale, and zero

accountability after the fact.

When I asked for a quote for this article, Paula had this to say:

“The Forest Service has always had the ability to remove trees that pose a real risk to public safety. The broad-scale loss of remaining large and old-growth trees we’ve been seeing in recent years, done in the name of public safety, is nothing but a transparent and venal timber grab.”

The unfortunate truth is that a justification can always be found to designate a tree hazardous if one is sufficiently motivated to do so. This is particularly the case for large and old-growth trees, who do not get to be hundreds of years old without developing some degree of character. We must weigh the actual risks and consequences when making such considerations, amongst which is the stark reality of an increasingly hot, sterile, and unsurvivable world. Any claim that an old tree potentially worth a lot of money in timber is “hazardous” must be met with a raised eyebrow and given at least a second, if not a third, look.

The only way to ensure that these trees won’t be cut down for the money under false premises is to eliminate the profit-motive from the equation by preventing their commercial sale.

At the June 18th planning commission meeting in Humboldt County one such proposal was made during a presentation by staff from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). They suggested that if the special permit were to be granted and the giant old redwood allowed to be cut down, perhaps a provision should be made mandating that the trunk be donated to the Redwood State Park system to be used for habitat value. Needless to say, Scarlett and his lawyer found this potential stipulation highly objectionable.

References

Q-zone logging:

<https://lostcoastoutpost.com/2026/jan/29/five-old-growth-redwoods-were-cut-down-lower-redwa/>

<https://lostcoastoutpost.com/2026/apr/30/lower-redway-trees/>

<https://lostcoastoutpost.com/2026/may/1/removal-lower-redway-old-growth-redwood-temporarily/>

<https://lostcoastoutpost.com/2026/may/6/lower-redway-old-growth-redwood-cannot-be-removed/>

<https://lostcoastoutpost.com/2026/jun/19/humboldt-planning-commission-denies-permit-request/>

Willamette National Forest logging:

<https://www.opb.org/article/2021/08/19/environmental-groups-sue-over-post-wildfire-roadside-logging-plans/>

<https://www.opb.org/article/2021/11/05/roadside-logging-willamette-national-forest/>

<https://www.opb.org/article/2022/01/13/roadside-logging-willamette-national-forest/>

<https://eugeneweekly.com/2021/05/28/after-the-fires/>

Old-growth logging in the Malheur National Forest:

<https://www.opb.org/article/2020/11/10/eastern-oregon-trees-are-playing-an-outsized-role-in-curbing-climate-change-study/>

<https://bluemountainsbiodiversityproject.org/2022/02/16/large-tree-logging-in-the-malheur-national-forest/>

<https://bluemountainsbiodiversityproject.org/2024/12/02/logging-is-not-restoration/>

<https://bluemountainsbiodiversityproject.org/logging-as-a-false-solution-to-wildfire-and-community-safety/>

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/forests-and-global-change/articles/10.3389/ffgc.2020.594274/full>