

Los Angeles Times  
**latimes.com**

**iFilm** "Reinventing an American Art Form", a 30 minute special  
Exclusive! on the making of **CHICAGO**



<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-forest17mar17,1,2889282.story?coll=la%2Dheadlines%2Dcalifornia>

## Big Proposals Target a Small U.S. Forest

### The Cleveland National could see power lines, a pipeline and a major highway.

By Janet Wilson  
Times Staff Writer

March 17, 2003

It is a patchwork wilderness tucked among fast-growing California counties, and everybody wants a piece.

As the Cleveland National Forest undergoes a 15-year management plan update, all kinds of ideas are on the map. They include blasting a highway through the mountains, draping a 500,000-volt power line along its eastern flank, and generating power -- and profits -- by pumping water up its slopes.

All national forests are increasingly under pressure to balance competing demands, such as the need for oil and the protection of endangered species. But the Cleveland forest, already cut into three pieces and hemmed in by the suburbs of Orange, Riverside and San Diego counties, is one of the nation's smallest. There is more at stake here because there is so little left, and everyone from the Bush administration to backwoods residents has a vision of what should or should not be done.

"It's a very high-pressure zone of urban development," said Anne Fege, Cleveland's supervisor.

To some, that makes water, power and road projects a necessity.

"The jobs are in Orange County, and the houses are in Riverside [County]," said John Licata, public works director for commuter-clogged Corona. He and other officials say the only answer is a road or tunnel through the forest to siphon off traffic. "You either have to go through it, over it or under it -- but it's got to go through the Cleveland National Forest."

To others, however, population growth makes the forest all the more precious.

"It's the tiniest national forest in California, and it's surrounded by millions of people," said Elin Motherhead, member of a Riverside County group battling the power line and dam projects. "Any change allowing development is a horrid idea.... Where else are all these people going to go when they want to hike, or bike, or just stand there and say, 'Wow, this is

what it looked like before there were people here?" "

Individual projects will not be approved during the forest management plan update, which is scheduled to be finished in late 2004 along with plans for the larger Angeles, San Bernardino and Los Padres national forests. But zoning to allow those projects could be included -- and with six alternate maps being considered, many predict that any decision will be challenged in court.

"I really sympathize with the Forest Service," said Mike Boeck, a longtime forest resident on the Orange County side. "People want to build hydroelectric dams. People want to build roads. People want to go motocrossing. People want wilderness areas. They're smack dab in the middle of this, and no matter what they do, I guarantee you some group will sue."

Formed in 1908 by President Theodore Roosevelt as a 2-million-acre reserve stretching southeast of Anaheim all the way to Mexico, the forest has since been whittled down to about 427,000 acres hopscotching over freeways, military bases and towns. More than 830,000 visitors use it for recreation each year.

The Cleveland National Forest, like all others, wasn't originally intended to be a park. It was designed to provide clean water and a steady supply of timber. But over the years, recreation and wildlife protection have been added to the missions of the forest -- labeled "Land of many uses" by the federal government.

The forest's northern third is the focus of most proposals, thanks to suburban sprawl on both sides. Orange County's housing tracts are nibbling at the western edge. On the east side, Inland Empire commuters fume in heavy traffic on the Riverside Freeway in the shadow of the imposing Santa Ana Mountains, which block easy passage to coastal jobs.

### Lush With Life

The forest today is a rumpled green blanket of stony peaks and plunging clefts. Golden eagles, mountain lions and scores of other species -- including 22 that are endangered -- roam the chaparral-covered mountains.

Like any urban oasis, the Cleveland forest bears harsh signs of civilization in spots. Graffiti is scrawled on the rocks above the scenic Ortega waterfalls. The body of Samantha Runnion, the 5-year-old Stanton girl abducted and killed in July, was found on the forest's South Main Divide Road last summer.

Retired firefighter Mike Palmer owns a 30-acre ranch in the heart of the forest. His mother is buried next to an ancient Indian cooking site there. "This is the only thing the Indians did to the Earth -- made a few holes in the granite," he said, showing stones smoothed by hands hundreds of years ago.

Now, the Palmers shoo brightly clad Ninja motorcyclists off their land. Recreational vehicle drivers have emptied waste tanks at their front gate. When the Palmers head to town, they dodge tractor-trailers roaring down the tortuous two-lane Ortega Highway loaded with construction materials blasted out of the foothills.

But for Mike Palmer, nothing is worse than what could rise from the valley below. Elsinore

Valley Municipal Water District has hooked up with Nevada Hydro, a Vista-based energy investment company, to propose pumping the water of Lake Elsinore up the steep mountain slopes. The water would be stored at night, then released downhill during daylight to drive energy-producing turbines. The process would consume more energy than it would create, but because of differences in day and night power prices, the profits could be substantial.

### Electrical Opportunity

In a related project, a 28-mile transmission line would link San Diego Gas & Electric lines in the south with Southern California Edison lines in the north, making it possible to sell and move power in either direction. In addition, a canyon high in the forest would be dammed and filled with 300 feet of water.

Environmentalists say Lake Elsinore's murky, algae-choked waters would seep out of the reservoir and ruin one of Orange County's last pristine watersheds, San Juan Creek.

Residents in lower, remote canyon communities fret that if the dam ever broke, there wouldn't be time to evacuate safely. Back-country views would also be marred by the concrete dam.

"I don't think anyone should be able to take a big chop out of the forest," Palmer said.

Palmer, who fought fires for the Orange County Fire Authority and the California Department of Forestry, also fears that a wildfire started by high-voltage lines in the forest would sweep into Mission Viejo, San Clemente or other communities.

The Santa Anas, fierce easterly winds that can catch a stray spark and turn it into an inferno, accelerate through these mountains. Half a dozen canyons overlooking Lake Elsinore are named for firefighters who died in 1959 trying to outrun wind-fed flames.

Water district and Nevada Hydro officials say technology has greatly reduced the risk of a blaze being sparked by the wires. Firefighting helicopters could use reservoir water, and a path under the transmission line could serve as a firebreak, they say.

"The district's perspective is: 'We're not building houses or office buildings,' " said water district spokesman Greg Morrison. "We're talking about a power line that would run along the very edge of the forest."

The district has spent \$1 million since 1991 to advance the proposal, and is now paying \$20,000 a month to Washington lobbying firms. They have made some progress, although the project is not a done deal.

The Forest Service ostensibly has final say on the power line, but two local congressmen on Wednesday introduced legislation to require designation of a power-line corridor. Forest supervisor Fege said top officials of the Department of Agriculture, which oversees the Forest Service, are carefully watching the power-line proposal, though she declined to say what position they have taken.

"We've had a lot of interest from the department," she said. "They are very aware of what we're doing."

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission would have to license the hydroelectric pump and dam portion, but forest officials would perform environmental reviews.

Bill Vardoulis, an Orange County engineer, says he has a one-stop solution to everyone's needs -- a \$3-billion tunnel through the mountains that could handle water pipes, electricity lines and 120,000 commuters a day, with no harm to the forest above.

China and several European countries all have earthquake-proof, environmentally sensitive tunnels that vent exhaust at both ends, Vardoulis says. And he has supporters, including Rep. Ken Calvert (R-Corona).

### Tunnel's Tough Prospect

Now if only he could get environmental groups and the Irvine Co., whose land would be needed to build the tunnel, to see it his way. So far, company executives have rejected the idea, instead pushing for a second highway on top of railroad tracks that parallel the Riverside Freeway.

Activist Boeck doesn't like the tunnel idea either and says the billions in needed financing mean that it will never happen. He is more worried about a push by Riverside transportation planners to put a highway through the forest, with one possible route going through the sylvan canyon where he has lived for 16 years.

"They should double-deck the 91 Freeway, not further fragment the forest," he said. "We need wildlife corridors, not highways."

Riverside County officials have proposed four options for a 15- to 20-mile corridor that would cross the highest reaches of the Santa Ana Mountains.

### The Opposite Vision

Environmental groups plan to resist all the proposals. The Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity and others have another idea for the forest update: designate at least three new wilderness areas in or near the path of possible projects.

"The whole thing ought to be wilderness," said Paul Carlton, co-chairman of the Santa Ana Mountains Task Force, a Sierra Club offshoot. "Wilderness to us is an area that is going to be safe from a reservoir, or a profit-making hydroelectric scheme, or a road. The most important thing is to preserve biodiversity."

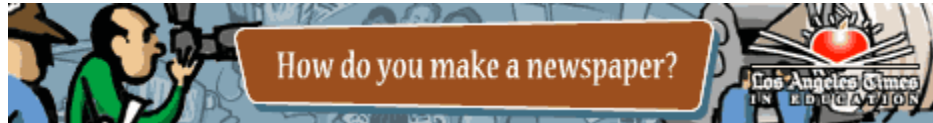
U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) included Cleveland forest lands in a bill to add more wilderness areas to national forests, but they were removed after objections from congressional Republicans who support the hydroelectric and road ideas, Forest Service officials and environmentalists said.

On a recent weekday, Nicolai Billy, an artist who lives in the forest, explained why he wants it left alone. He picked a handful of buckwheat from the edge of bucolic Morrell Canyon, the preferred dam site, then stepped onto a forest access road and placed the scrap of green on the sun-baked pavement.

"Take this road; this is the rest of California. Take this little bit of green right here, that's all that's left of the forest. We have a sacrosanct duty to protect what's left."

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at [latimes.com/archives](http://latimes.com/archives).

 [Click here for article licensing and reprint options](#)



Copyright 2003 Los Angeles Times