

# Cradle of forest threatened by new predators

**I**T'S NOT a far drive to the tree farm at the top of the mountain where Hal Wells works and where everything is different from the way it is down here in the valley.

It may be the fact that everything up there is different that starts you thinking about life down here. Or maybe such thinking comes from talking to Wells, a man who is not an official guru but who nonetheless dispenses wisdom from the top of a mountain.

Whatever the case, it is clear that one trip to the state-run nursery at Ben Lomond can provide you with a whole new way of looking at the place where we live.

In the valley, people work at making mind-boggling and innovative products — products that by their very design are meant to last only until something better comes along — and it better come



**SOUTH BAY DISPATCHES**

*Mike Cassidy*

along quick. Version 4.0 becomes version 5.0 becomes version 6.0. The 386 is pushed aside by the 486, which must get out of the way for the Pentium.

And on it goes.

That's where the money is. That's what people want. That's what politicians and business leaders point to with pride.

That is not the way it works up on top of the mountain. Wells works at making trees: coast redwoods, Jeffery pines, Douglas fir, live oaks, maples and others. His products are meant to last, and they usually do.

"You put the seed in the ground, then you wait," said

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# Cradle of forest threatened

*Ben Lomond life is flip-side of valley*

## ■ DISPATCHES

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Wells, who's worked at the nursery for almost 20 years. "The night you get through putting the seed in the ground, you say, 'It's in. Good, bad or indifferent.' Then you notice a little thing coming up here and a little thing coming up there. It's magic."

Wells becomes attached to the rows and rows of runty 12-inch trees. So what if they look like props for a model railroad set. Wells always knew, until recently anyway, that they would mature. Then some would go to replace blackened ancestors in state forests ravaged by fire. Others would be used to stop dirt and rock from sliding down hillsides. Still others would end up in living rooms at Christmastime, decorated with baubles and family symbols that had spent the previous 12 months in a closet or attic.

This year, his confidence that the young trees would thrive was shaken. State administrators recommended closing the 40-year-old nursery to save about \$600,000. Aides to state Sen. Hen-



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ry Mello say they believe nursery supporters have saved it for now. But its budget will be cut, and eventually tree sales will have to pay for the nursery's operation if it is to remain open.

Wells continues to worry.

He is hardly a rabble-rouser. His voice is soft and reserved. He talks a little like Garrison Keillor. He wastes few words and offers simple truths about work, about nature and about life.

He's 53 years old. His 15 years of fighting fires for the California Department of Forestry means he's eligible for retirement. Whether the nursery stays open or closes, that is what he will probably do soon.

He understands the state budget has been cut severely and

that many vital services have been cast aside. He's not trying to rate trees over other needs. Still, he chuckles at the notion that while government bureaucrats needlessly kill trees to produce thick reports about nothing in particular, he is working away growing new trees.

"For a state employee to actually produce something," said Wells, whose father worked for the state department of real estate, "to produce something that you know in the back of your mind is going to outlive you, that's neat."

Wells makes his point without really trying. It is clear that what people down here really care about is right now. Orchards disappear, and condominiums spring up. Corporate profits are watched day-by-day. Spending now for gains later is becoming a foreign idea. And spending money for trees that will take decades to amount to anything, well, that's almost crazy.

Down here, people live in a world of deadlines and fast-tracking. Work is done on the run. People work flex time, juggling families and commute patterns and getting things done when they can. They telecommute, working from home or a remote office.

At the top of the mountain, there are deadlines, too. But the schedules are set by nature. There is no fast-tracking. Telecommuting is out.

"Everything has to be done when the trees and the weather let you," Wells said.

Wells has battled freezes, droughts, floods, deer, gophers and crows.

He beat them all.

But these days, the predators are more fierce. These days he is dealing with a breed that demands results now.