

Wood thieves strike



SHMUEL THALER/SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

A tree stump in Soquel Demonstration State Forest is likely the work of wood poachers who pay little heed to the environment.

Downstream effects: Poaching hurts fisheries, watershed

By Becky Bach
Santa Cruz Sentinel

BOULDER CREEK — Often the only clue is the rumble of a distant chain saw, muffled by dense stands of oak and redwood. Or perhaps it's a new trail, or fresh tire tracks leading away from a paved roadway.

For Rich Sampson, the clue is often a phone call that comes too late. Sampson, a battalion chief with Cal Fire, is the woods warden of the Santa Cruz Mountains, charged with combating a widespread but little-known crime: wood poaching.

Poachers pluck trees at will from the for-

est, paying little heed to the environment or the extensive regulations that govern timber harvesting in California. And landowners are often left with a costly cleanup.

"There's a criminal element that thinks this is a quick, easy way of making it," Sampson said. "These guys don't get a license. They don't follow rules."

No one keeps statistics, but Sampson estimates 1,000 cords of wood are stolen in Santa Cruz County each year, primarily in the fall and winter. That's enough wood to fill about

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2,000 pickups.

But authorities say most of the poaching goes unreported. "We're only seeing a tip of it," Sampson said.

Poachers often work at night in remote areas, limiting the amount of time they're visible from a roadway. Some even use lookouts. And most operations are small: Poachers just pop into the woods to chop up a few trees — some standing, some already fallen.

And most of the time, they get away with it.

"By the time the sheriff shows up, they're long gone," said Jeffrey Amen, owner of Natural Heat Firewood in Felton.

Although poaching occurs frequently, the number of actual arrests is small — no more than a dozen a year in Santa Cruz County. Sampson said he, state park rangers and sheriff's deputies account for most of the apprehensions.

Because few natural gas lines extend into the mountains, propane or wood is used to heat most homes, said Jason Rule, a park ranger at Castle Rock and Portola Redwoods state parks.

Rule said wood poaching is one of the most significant issues he encounters — something that surprises many state park visitors. "If they're from the city, they don't think about it," he said.

The poachers are a motley mix of drug addicts, free-spirited locals and other folks just looking to make a quick buck. Their illegal occupation is an open secret in San Lorenzo Valley towns such as Boulder Creek and Ben Lomond, where firewood is a hot commodity as temperatures drop.

"It's been going on here in the valley for as long as I've lived here," said Karin Ann Park, who has co-owned Joe's Bar in Boulder Creek for 37 years.

Amen agreed. "There's a lot of guys doing it, especially when the economy's turning down," he said.

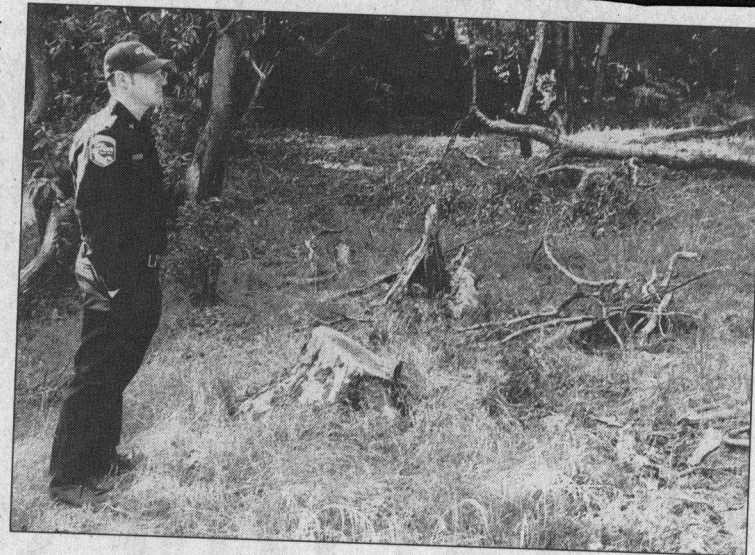
And although the practice is far from accepted, it's likely to remain in a region where jobs are scarce and trees abundant.

"There's always going to be somebody out wood poaching," said longtime San Lorenzo Valley resident Glenda Mecredy.

Environmental harm

In addition to endangering the poachers — who often operate chain saws on steep, slippery ground in the dark — sloppy woodcutting wreaks havoc on the region's unstable slopes and sensitive streams, home to endangered populations of coho salmon and steelhead trout.

"You wonder how could tree cutting affect those fish? Fish don't live on trees," said Betsy Herbert, an environmental analyst with the San Lorenzo Valley Water District, which



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supplies water to residents from Felton to the Santa Clara County line, the area hardest hit by the effects of poaching.

Herbert explained that haphazard cuts spur erosion, which adds sediment to creeks, smothering fish eggs. And cutting creek-side trees also removes submerged clumps of roots that provide hide-outs for vulnerable baby fish, Herbert said.

Too much logging can also reduce the water supply, she said.

Usually, the forest's canopy filters the rain, slowing it down so it has a greater chance of soaking into the soil and replenishing the region's reservoirs. When too many trees are removed, Herbert said, rain splashes directly on the ground, where it's more likely to wash away.

Poachers also drive onto

muddy roads, leaving behind deep ruts, which also diverts water, Herbert said.

"It becomes a mess pretty quick," agreed Rule.

Legal logs

The landowner, or public agency, is often left with the restoration tab. Cal Fire's Sampson recalled one case near Big Basin Redwoods State Park where the damage to the roads alone cost about \$4,000.

Wood poaching also frustrates legal firewood dealers, who have to follow regulations that fill a 3-inch-thick book, Sampson said.

"There's a million rules as far as what you can do and where you can do it," said Amen, the Felton firewood dealer. He said he has a business license and several types of insurance

— expenses skirted by poachers.

Landowners who want to cut wood on their property for their own use, such as firewood or even for a fence, do not need a permit, Sampson said. But selling wood or operating on privately owned land triggers the need for a Timber Harvest Plan, the woodland equivalent of an environmental impact report that must be approved by a licensed forester.

The timber plans provide protections for waterways and rare species and limit the size of the harvest. They also ensure that neighbors are notified of timber operations nearby, Sampson said.

Law enforcement officials draw on the many regulations to catch poachers.

They can nab them when they're actually cutting or

trespassing. And anyone transporting wood on a public road needs a receipt or permit from a landowner, which any peace officer can ask for, Sampson said.

Buying firewood

Poachers often sell the stolen wood from the side of the road or on Craigslist, Sampson said.

Before buying wood, he said, customers should always ask to see a permit, which all dealers are required to carry. They should also ask where the wood came from.

"If they're not answering questions or they're being averse, you can bet it's not a legal operation," Rule said.

The price of firewood fluctuates, depending on the wood quality. But it usually sells for \$250 to \$450 a cord.

Some shady dealers cover a load of inferior wood such as pine, or even wet wood, with oak. The customer is then left with a stack of unusable wood. Poachers might also try to pass off freshly cut wood as kiln-dried or aged.

"You never know what you're going to get when they unload the truck," Amen said.

Sampson said suspicious wood buyers are welcome to notify Cal Fire.

"If it sounds too good to be true," Rule warned, "it probably is."