

Ben Lomond

State nursery threatened

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Hal Wells has managed the CDF nursery operation on Empire Grade Road for the past 18 years.

Ben Lomond facility in danger Budget ax hangs over 40-year-old tree supplier

By MAY WONG
Sentinel staff writer

BEN LOMOND — Millions of trees planted throughout the state each year got their start at the Ben Lomond State Nursery.

Whether it's the Christmas tree you bought last year or the tree that shaded you from the blistering sun at Loch Lomond, chances are its roots go back to the 40-year-old facility on Empire Grade Road.

Today the nursery finds itself on shaky ground. The state's \$1 million nursery program, which provides the money to operate the nursery, may be axed if either of two state plans comes to fruition.

The nursery program may be cut under a proposed reorganization plan for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. The plan could be in effect as early as fall, CDF officials say.

Or it may be cut even sooner under a proposal by a state Senate subcommittee to reduce \$37.2 million from the CDF budget and comply with Gov. Wilson's budget plan. That subcommittee proposal is under discussion by the Senate and Assembly Conference Committee.

"The program has been going since the late '20s, and I'd hate to see it shut down just because we have a poor budget problem over the next few years," said Hal Wells, who has managed the Ben Lomond

nursery for the past 18 years.

"Just a stroke of a pen and you lose all this," he said, waving his arm at 12 acres of seedlings.

The nursery is one of three in the state program which produces up to 6 million seedlings annually. The seedlings are used to reforest areas ravaged by fire, floods or logging; to control erosion; and to protect watershed basins or supply Christmas tree farms.

Robert Criswell, owner of Black Road Christmas Tree Farms near the Lexington Reservoir in the Santa Cruz Mountains, is one of at least two dozen people who have sent letters this week to the

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state protesting the proposed closure.

"Every tree that I have sold since 1970 came from the Ben Lomond nursery," he said. "They grow genetically right trees ... and they also supply invaluable advice."

Practically all the Christmas tree farms in California get their seedlings from the state nurseries, Criswell said.

The two other state nurseries are in Davis and in Magalia, just outside of Chico. All three combined provide California's largest source of forest-type trees.

This year, the Ben Lomond nursery will sell approximately 2 million trees to customers all along the Pacific Coast and as far inland as Calaveras County, Wells said. The stock includes 33 different species and 99 seed lots — different types of seeds that have adapted to the climates or elevations of certain regions.

Ponderosa pines, Monterey pines, big leaf maple, coastal live oak, canyon live oak, blue oak, valley oak, coastal redwoods, California nutmeg — you name the tree,

and the state nurseries are the only ones that would have all the seedlings, said Jonathan Rea, the state's nursery program manager.

The program is set up to ensure there is a genetically correct growing stock for reforestation in all parts of the state, he said.

"I must say the private industry does a very good job of filling some of those requirements, but we're really the only source for some seed lots in the state ... I don't see anybody filling our shoes with the correct trees."

Foresters, Christmas tree farmers and private landowners agree.

"No other nurseries grow as much stock," said local forester consultant Edward Tunheim. "And they really grow large, healthy, vigorous trees. They produce a much better tree for the same price."

Tunheim, one of the Ben Lomond nursery's biggest customers, plants up to 50,000 trees a year in the Santa Cruz Mountains for private landowners as well as for the city of Santa Cruz, which plants 15,000 trees a year at Loch Lomond to protect the watershed.

Nursery Manager Wells said he's angry that the state would consider cutting the nursery program.

If the state nurseries close, "you're going to have 400 people out there scrambling for trees to put them in the ground," Wells said.

Among them will be William and Margaret Elliot of Watsonville.

The couple depend on seedlings purchased from CDF to replant their land for windbreaks, erosion control, fuelwood and agricultural buffers, according to a letter they wrote to CDF this week.

"Private nurseries don't usually stock the correct trees for our land," they said. "Because of the large amounts of seedlings we need ... ordering and purchasing them from private nurseries would be prohibitive."

Should the state nurseries close, Tunheim said he may have to contract with a nursery in Washington to get seedlings.

"They tell people to reforest the country, but you turn around and say, 'but there's no trees available,'" Tunheim said. "That's absurd."