

John Litton  
4822 West Avenue M-8  
Quartz Hill, CA 93536

8 March 2003

To: THE SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY BOARD  
Ref. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS)  
The Giant Sequoia National Monument Management Plan

I was asked to comment on the Management Plan regarding the use of fire suppression as a management method in the Giant Sequoia National Monument. When asked to respond, my first questions were "What do you manage in a National Monument?" and "Isn't it protected from exploitation?"

I have been working for the U.S. Forest Service as an aviation manager and supervisory aerial firefighting pilot for over eight years. It is from this aviation background as a leadplane and smokejumper pilot that I give my observations and opinions on this issue of wildland fire suppression.

NO wildland fires have ever been put out by aircraft. The inclusion of aviation into the fire suppression business was to provide a rapid "initial attack" response to slow the advance of small fires by the use of chemicals (retardant) in support of ground firefighters, or by the use of smokejumpers. Not all tactics and resources work well, if at all, on every incident. It should be no surprise to anyone that we are totally ineffective in stopping wildland fires when they reach a certain state. The best we can do is evacuate and wait, much the same as those who wait for the passing of a tornado. The state at which a fire is unstoppable is easy to predict and yet many firefighters are put in harms way each year without a hope of accomplishing anything. This was abundantly clear as one watched the fatigued men and women attempting to suppress the firestorm that was the Show Low Fire in Arizona last year. Their words to the media were that they would do what they could to protect life and property but a weather change was the only thing that would stop the fire. Common knowledge among old firefighters is that people do not put out fires, the weather does. That is why when Aviation field personnel (contract and federal) hear that "thinning" is being explored as a means to reduce a threat of fire on public lands, we can only shake our collective heads in amazement. Fire is a natural and necessary phenomenon in all our forests, but many of the hottest, fastest moving, and most destructive fires are typically associated, either partially or entirely, with past or present logging operations. Thinning aggravates the fire potential by artificially manipulating the weather pattern in a stable forest ecosystem. It opens the forest to wind, reduces the relative humidity, dries everything out, and makes it more prone to burn and burn hot. The added damage to the forest floor by the men and equipment required for such operations is easily seen from the air and should be of particular concern in this Monument. It not only destroys the fragile wild state of the land, but also directly impacts the health and survival of the shallow-rooted Giant Sequoia for which the monument was named.

A century of fire suppression, in an effort to "get out the cut", has created problems one might not expect. Forest Service records show that for the last one hundred years, the average number of acres burned per ten-year period has not significantly changed. However, active fire suppression has created the environment for hotter fires that literally scorch the earth. In other words, if there had been no wildland fire suppression from 1900 on, the same number of acres would have burned and we would be in better shape environmentally than we are today. We certainly would be better off financially. Last year, fire-fighting expenditures in the Forest Service alone reached \$1.3 billion dollars (less than \$350 million had been budgeted). This was a wakeup call to management and, fortunately, they began to listen to the field in an effort to reevaluate just what we were really accomplishing. The cost-benefit analysis was so dismal that Washington has since stepped in, dictating changes in policy and tactics to scale back a culture that has, up until now, had a blank check. In a recent television interview, former Interior Secretary Babbitt stated, "One hundred years of fire suppression has created a complex long-term problem and logging is not the answer". From my nearly 2000 hours of flight experience over fires in the western United States, I wholeheartedly agree.

*John C. Litton*