



Beetle-Kill, Logging, and a New Monument at *Medicine Lake*

The Forest Service is cutting dead and dying trees across a sacred landscape that became a national monument just last year — and whose future is now contested. What's happening, why, and what to ask.

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▲ **About this briefing.** Unlike a rumor, this project is real and ongoing — it draws on U.S. Forest Service announcements and public records. It is written to help neighbors, visitors, and tribal community members understand an active project on a newly protected, and politically contested, sacred landscape, and to ask good questions. It is not a position paper.

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01 — OVERVIEW

The short version

The U.S. Forest Service is thinning and removing dead and dying trees across the Medicine Lake area of Northern California, where a mountain pine beetle outbreak — worsened by drought and winter windstorms — has killed dense stands of lodgepole pine.

On its own, that is a familiar forest-health and public-safety story. What makes Medicine Lake different is *where* it sits. This is **Sáttítla** — sacred ground to the Pit River and Modoc peoples for more than ten thousand years — and in January 2025 it became the **Sáttítla Highlands National Monument**, a 224,676-acre protected landscape the Pit River Nation spent nearly three decades fighting to establish. The monument's future is now contested: the current administration has signaled it wants to rescind it.

Here is the knot at the center of this briefing. The monument **allows** hazardous fuels reduction, so removing dead trees that threaten people and could fuel a catastrophic fire is permitted — and even tribal and conservation allies do their own fuels work. But the monument **bars** commercial clear-cutting and industrial extraction, and this project also includes thinning of green stands and the removal of sawlogs. The monument's management plan — which is supposed to be written with the Tribes — does not yet exist. So the real questions are not "should dangerous dead trees be removed," but how the project's commercial and green-tree elements, its methods, and its cultural protections square with a sacred landscape and its new, still-unsettled protection. This briefing lays out the project, the place, the stakes, and the questions worth asking.

224,676 acres

The S  t  tla Highlands National Monument, designated Jan. 2025

10,000+ yrs

Of Indigenous spiritual use of this landscape

~950 yrs

Since the Medicine Lake Volcano last erupted

40,000+ / yr

Visitors to the Medicine Lake Recreation Area

02 — THE PROJECT

What's happening on the ground

The work is the **Medicine Lake Caldera Vegetation Treatment Project**, run by the Modoc National Forest. According to the Forest Service, crews and partners are [thinning and removing hazardous trees](#) in response to widespread tree mortality from beetle infestations worsened by drought and winter wind storms, to improve public safety and accelerate restoration of forest health. The trees being cut are mostly dead or dying. West Zone district ranger Isaac Gansberg has described managing the beetle mortality in the caldera as critical for forest health, public safety, and hazard reduction, framing it as removing dead and dying lodgepole and thinning vulnerable stands to lower the fuel loads that intensify fire behavior.

A few specifics matter for understanding the footprint. The Forest Service says the project [will continue for several years](#) and includes the removal of sawlogs and piling of woody material; in stands less affected by the beetle, group selection and thinning will manage different age groups of trees. Two different things happen to the cut wood, and they are worth keeping straight: the sawlogs are merchantable timber that is removed and sold — the commercial side of the project — while the leftover woody debris is piled and then chipped, removed, or burned. Separately, downed wood is sometimes offered to

campers as *firewood*, though the agency [warns visitors not to carry it home](#) if they have pines near their property, because beetles may remain in the bark.

What visitors will see

Expect dramatic changes to the landscape, temporary campground and day-use closures, and noise from crews cutting and hauling, with different sites closed at different times as the multi-year work moves through the area. (Spraying of the insecticide carbaryl on selected campground trees was used in earlier phases of beetle management here; the current emphasis is on removal and thinning.) The most consequential closure of the season is not for logging at all: from **July 15–21, 2026**, the [Annual Pit River Tribal Gathering](#) closes the Medicine and A.H. Hogue loops.

03 — THE SETTING

Sáttítla: the place

Medicine Lake sits at 6,770 feet in the summit caldera of the **Medicine Lake Volcano** — one of the two largest volcanoes in the Cascade arc, covering an area [roughly ten times that of Mount St. Helens](#). The landscape is a study in contrasts: stark, unvegetated lava fields interspersed with islands of forest, more than a hundred cinder cones, and hundreds of lava tubes — including Giant Crater, the longest known lava-tube system in the world. The volcano is dormant, not dead; it has erupted multiple times in the last 12,500 years, as recently as about 950 years ago.

The name tells you what the place is made of. In the Ajumawi language, these lands are **Sáttítla** — ["obsidian place"](#) — for the volcanic glass the mountain produced, which Indigenous people have worked into tools here for millennia. The skies above are among the darkest in the United States, and the terrain is so lunar-like that NASA brought Apollo astronauts to the area's Pumice Crater in the 1960s to train for the Moon. Today the Medicine Lake Recreation Area — five campgrounds and eighty-six sites along the lakeshore, ringed by mature lodgepole pine — draws more than 40,000 visitors a year for camping, fishing, swimming, and stargazing.

04 — CULTURAL STAKES

A sacred landscape

"Medicine Lake is our church"

For the Pit River (Ajumawi–Atsugewi) and Modoc peoples, and for the Karuk, Klamath, Shasta, Siletz, Wintu, and Yana, this is sacred ground. In Pit River tradition, [the Creator and his son bathed in the lake](#) after making the earth, and the Creator left his healing spirit in the water; the area has served as a training ground for medicine people across the West. The Modoc know the lake and its banks as "*Lani'shwi*," a place of healing. People have come here for at least ten thousand years for vision quests, ceremony, and the gathering of medicine — at least 85 plant species in Sáttítla are used by Indigenous peoples for healing, food, and ceremony.

This is not only a scenic recreation area. It is a living place of worship and cultural survival, and it should be treated as one.

That significance is formally recognized. In 1999 the National Register of Historic Places found roughly 33,000 acres centered on Medicine Lake eligible as a [Traditional Cultural District](#); in 2007 the Forest Service and BLM extended that recognition to about 73,000 acres. The land also carries hard history: during the Modoc War of 1872–73, some Modoc people sought refuge in Sáttítla and avoided forced relocation. For the tribes connected here, the people and the land are understood as one — the silence, the dark skies, the plants and animals, and the pure water are all necessary to carry out ceremony.

05 — PROTECTION & POLITICS

The new monument — and its uncertain future

On **January 14, 2025**, President Biden used the Antiquities Act to designate the **Sáttítla Highlands National Monument**: [224,676 acres](#) spanning the Modoc, Shasta-Trinity, and Klamath national forests, managed by the Forest Service. The Pit River Nation led the effort, the close of [nearly thirty years](#) of resisting industrial geothermal development — a fight that reached the Ninth Circuit, where tribes and allies won rulings in 2010 and 2019 against geothermal leases on the sacred highlands. The monument proclamation calls

for [co-stewardship with Tribal Nations](#), and a management plan must be completed within three years of designation.

Crucially for this briefing, the designation draws a line between what is and isn't allowed. The monument is meant to prevent industrial energy development, mining, and the clear-cutting of forests — but the White House was explicit that the proclamation "[will allow a range of other activities, including hazardous fuels reduction](#)" in the forests of the Sástítla Highlands. That single sentence is why the beetle work can proceed inside a monument at all.

Status as of mid-2026: contested. Within months of the designation, the new administration moved to undo it. A 2026 [Justice Department opinion](#) asserted that a president can abolish national monuments, singling out Sástítla and Chuckwalla, and framing the action around a declared "energy emergency." Local Rep. Doug LaMalfa, whose district includes the monument, has urged that it be reversed. Conservation and tribal groups dispute the president's authority and a court fight is widely expected, echoing the still-unresolved battle over Utah's Bears Ears. As the Pit River Nation's Brandy McDaniels put it, the Tribe is once again "in limbo."

The monument also has critics beyond the administration. Some local and congressional Republicans call large, last-minute monument designations federal overreach that locks up land from energy, grazing, and timber. Supporters answer that this monument was tribe-led, passed with broad backing in the California legislature and from local "gateway" recreation businesses, and that it protects water and sacred sites that extraction would otherwise foreclose. Both arguments are part of a live, unsettled debate over how this land should be used.

06 — THE CASE FOR THE WORK

The beetle, and why the Forest Service is cutting

The mountain pine beetle (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*) is a native bark beetle barely the size of a grain of rice, but it kills trees at scale. A female bores in and releases pheromones that summon a [mass attack](#) — hundreds of beetles overwhelming one tree's pitch defenses before an anti-aggregation signal sends them on to its neighbors. They carry a blue-stain fungus that, together with the larvae, girdles the tree and cuts off its

water; an attacked tree stays green at first, fades to red needles within about a year, and turns grey within three to four. In lodgepole pine the largest-diameter trees are taken first, and peer-reviewed work finds the mortality concentrates in the [densest parts of a stand](#). Outbreaks are driven by dense stands, drought stress, and warmer winters: cold snaps near -40° once held the beetle in check, but milder winters now let more survive and can let it fit two generations into a year instead of one. At Medicine Lake, the result is large stands of dead and dying lodgepole.

The Forest Service's case for acting rests on people and fire. This is a heavily used recreation area; standing dead trees near campgrounds, day-use sites, and roads are a falling hazard, and the agency's stated goal is to remove that hazard and reduce the fuel loads that can drive severe fire behavior. Several points strengthen that case:

◆ **There is a scientific basis for thinning, not just clearing.**

A U.S. Forest Service synthesis of the research finds that [reducing stand density](#) is among the most effective ways to lower a stand's susceptibility to bark beetles, by easing competition so the surviving trees can better defend themselves — the logic behind thinning vulnerable green stands, not only removing dead ones.

◆ **It is an allowed activity.**

Hazardous fuels reduction is one of the uses the monument proclamation expressly permits, so the safety rationale does not, by itself, conflict with the monument's purpose.

◆ **Allies do fuels work too.**

The Mount Shasta Bioregional Ecology Center — a longtime partner of the Pit River Nation in protecting Sáttítla — [completed 3.6 miles of fuels reduction](#) in the area to improve safety for residents and first responders. Removing genuine hazards is not inherently at odds with protecting the land.

◆ **The stakes of a bad fire are the sacred forest itself.**

A catastrophic, high-severity fire in these stands would harm the very cultural landscape, water, and habitat the monument exists to protect. Reducing that risk can be an act of stewardship.

07 — THE CASE FOR CAUTION

The concerns and the open questions

An equally real case says: be careful how this is done, and where the line falls between "hazard removal" and "logging." The concerns are specific to this place and this moment.

◆ **Hazard removal versus commercial timber.**

The monument bars commercial clear-cutting, yet the project includes "removal of sawlogs" and thinning of green stands. Clearing a dead tree that could fall on a campsite is plainly safety work; selling merchantable timber and cutting living trees across stands is closer to logging. Where exactly does this project fall, and who decides? The project's environmental decision and its maps of treatment units would answer that — which is why getting them on the public record matters.

◆ **Salvage and "sanitation" logging are contested.**

Standing dead trees, or snags, are not just fuel — they are prime habitat for woodpeckers and other wildlife, and research questions the ecological benefit of aggressive salvage and of cutting green trees for "sanitation." In the broader highlands, the separate [Antelope Tennant project](#) on the Klamath National Forest drew opposition for proposing thousands of acres of lodgepole clear-cutting under fuels and sanitation rationales — a reminder that "treatment" labels can cover very different things.

◆ **Thinning helps — but it is not a cure, and it can backfire.**

Cutting and removing infested trees can slow a small, early outbreak, but it will not stop a full-blown one. So if the beetle outbreak here is as large as the Forest Service says, the cutting is best understood as long-term forest-health work, not as a way to halt the beetles now. Two cautions come with it. Leaving clumps of big old trees — a common restoration goal, meant to mimic historical forests — can leave behind [patches the beetle still favors](#) in the very stands you treated. And most of the research behind these points is from ponderosa pine in Colorado and the Black Hills, not this high-elevation lodgepole, so it transfers only roughly.

◆ **The fire science is more nuanced than the headline.**

The danger of dead trees falling near people is concrete. The effect on large *wildfires* is real but complex: it depends on the stage of decay — freshly killed, red-needle stands behave differently from long-dead grey snags — and on weather and dryness, which dominate fire behavior. That nuance is a reason to scrutinize the scope and justification of work beyond developed sites, rather than treating every dead tree as a fire emergency.

◆ **Cultural resources and consultation.**

This is a designated Traditional Cultural District. Ground-based logging, road use, and slash burning can disturb cultural sites and the qualities — quiet, intact forest, dark skies — that ceremony depends on. Robust tribal consultation and cultural-resource protection are essential, not optional.

◆ **The management plan doesn't exist yet.**

The monument's plan — to be written with the Tribes within three years — is the document that should govern how vegetation is managed here. A multi-year logging project running ahead of that plan raises a fair question about sequencing and tribal co-stewardship.

None of this means the work is wrong. It means the difference between careful, hazard-focused stewardship and ordinary timber extraction comes down to the details — the trees marked, the acres, the methods, the protections — and those details deserve daylight.

08 — DOWNSTREAM

The water at stake

The reason this landscape matters far beyond its boundaries is underground. Rain and snowmelt filter through the porous volcanic rock into one of the largest aquifer networks in the country — caverns that, by one estimate, [store more pure water than California's 200 largest surface reservoirs combined](#), even in drought years. The Medicine Lake Volcano captures and discharges on the order of [1.2 million acre-feet](#) of water a year, emerging as Fall River Springs — the largest spring system in California — which sustains a renowned trout fishery before flowing into the Pit River, Shasta Lake, and the Sacramento River, and on to farms and millions of people downstream.

That hydrology is why tribes and conservationists have fought industrial development here so hard, and why what happens on the surface — logging, roads, soil disturbance, and the longer-term question of geothermal or mining if monument protections fall — carries weight for the whole region's water.

09 — IF YOU GO

Visiting respectfully

If you're planning a trip while this work is underway, a few things will make the visit safer and more respectful:

- ◆ **Check current conditions first.**

Active logging means rolling closures of campgrounds and day-use sites, plus changing road and fire conditions. Confirm what's open through the [Modoc National Forest and Recreation.gov](#) before you drive the hour-plus of forest road to the lake.

- ◆ **Plan around the Tribal Gathering.**

July 15–21, 2026, the Medicine and A.H. Hogue loops are closed for the Annual Pit River Tribal Gathering; few of the remaining sites fit large RVs.

- ◆ **Mind the firewood rule.**

You may use downed wood on site, but don't take beetle-affected wood home near your own pines — it can carry the insects.

◆ **Treat fire restrictions as non-negotiable.**

Dead, dry stands and abundant summer lightning make this high fire country; follow all posted restrictions.

◆ **Come as a guest on sacred ground.**

This is a place of active ceremony, not just a scenic stop. Tread lightly, pack out everything, respect closures and any cultural areas, and enjoy some of the darkest night skies in the country.

10 — TAKE PART

How to stay informed and weigh in

There is no single up-or-down vote here, but there are real ways to follow the project, push for transparency, and support strong protection of the landscape.

The agency

The **Modoc National Forest** runs the project and will manage the monument and write its plan. The Supervisor's Office is the place to ask for project records, the governing environmental analysis, maps of treatment units, and the cultural-resource and tribal-consultation measures.

WHO	HOW TO REACH THEM
Modoc National Forest Supervisor's Office	225 W. 8th St., Alturas, CA 96101 · (530) 233-5811 · fs.usda.gov/r05/modoc
Project & monument info	Forest "Projects" and "Newsroom" pages · current closures via Recreation.gov

The monument plan

The forthcoming management plan — required within three years of the January 2025 designation and meant to be built with the Tribes — is the highest-leverage place for

public input on how vegetation, recreation, and cultural protection are balanced going forward. Watch the Forest Service's planning announcements for comment periods.

The tribal-led protection effort

For those who want to support permanent protection of the landscape, the Pit River Nation leads the [Protect Sáttítla](#) effort, with the Mount Shasta Bioregional Ecology Center as a longtime partner. They are the people to follow on the monument's defense and on the push for added water protections.

Questions worth asking

- ◆ How many acres, and how many are genuine hazard-tree removal near developed sites versus thinning or sawlog harvest across stands?
- ◆ Are living (green) trees being cut, and under what justification?
- ◆ What environmental review governs the project, and was it completed before or after the January 2025 monument designation?
- ◆ How is the project consistent with the monument proclamation's limits on commercial logging?
- ◆ What tribal consultation has occurred, and how are cultural sites and Traditional Cultural District values being protected?
- ◆ How will this work be reconciled with the monument management plan once it's written?

11 — IN CLOSING

Where this stands

The beetle mortality is real, the hazard to visitors is real, and removing dangerous dead trees and reducing fire risk are legitimate — and permitted — work on this land. At the same time, this is one of the most sacred and newly protected landscapes in California, its monument is under political threat, its management plan is unwritten, and the project carries commercial-timber and green-thinning elements that sit closer to logging than to simple hazard removal. Those facts don't cancel each other out. They mean the work deserves a careful eye on its scope and methods, strong tribal co-stewardship, and real transparency — so that protecting the forest from fire doesn't quietly become something the monument was created to prevent.

Sáttítla has been cared for, and fought for, across thousands of years and many lifetimes. The most useful thing a community can do now is stay informed, ask precise questions, and insist that the people whose church this is are at the center of the decisions.

§ — SOURCING

References

Links are live and details current as of June 2026. The monument's legal status and the project's closures are fast-moving — verify time-sensitive items directly with the Modoc National Forest and the Pit River Tribe.

THE PROJECT

- **Hazard tree removal at Medicine Lake recreation area.** Modoc National Forest news release, Feb. 9, 2026 (the Medicine Lake Caldera Vegetation Treatment Project; ranger Isaac Gansberg; sawlogs, thinning, multi-year scope).
- **Medicine Lake Recreation Area opening.** Modoc National Forest (firewood guidance; beetles in bark).
- **Medicine Lake Recreation Area,** Recreation.gov, and [Modoc NF recreation page](#) (campgrounds, elevation, access, project closures).

THE PLACE AND THE MONUMENT

- **Proclamation on the Establishment of the Sáttítla Highlands National Monument.** The White House, Jan. 14, 2025 (also in the [Federal Register](#)).
- **Sáttítla Highlands National Monument.** U.S. Forest Service (acreage, geology, the volcano, "obsidian place," cultural significance).
- **Fact Sheet: President Biden Establishes Chuckwalla and Sáttítla Highlands National Monuments** (the monuments will allow hazardous fuels reduction).
- **Sáttítla Highlands National Monument,** Wikipedia (co-stewardship; designation timeline; rescission signal — overview with onward citations).

CULTURAL AND TRIBAL SIGNIFICANCE

- **Medicine Lake Highlands.** Sacred Land Film Project (creation story; "our church"; the geothermal fight; the Traditional Cultural District).
- **Protect Sáttítla** (the Pit River-led protection effort) and [Mount Shasta Bioregional Ecology Center](#) (the campaign, partners, and the aquifer).
- **Sáttítla Highlands National Monument is a land of history and wonder.** Courthouse News, Dec. 2025 (tribal voices; debates over use; the water).

THE CONTESTED STATUS, ECOLOGY, AND WATER

- Justice Department says Trump can cancel national monuments. LAist / AP, 2026; and [E&E News](#) (the rescission effort; LaMalfa; likely litigation).
- What We Lose If We Lose the S  t  tla Highlands National Monument. Z  calo Public Square, Jan. 2026 (species; aquifer; the "energy emergency" framing).
- Medicine Lake Highlands Threatened by Clearcutting. EPIC / Environmental Protection Information Center, 2023 (the separate Klamath NF Antelope Tennant project; the salvage/sanitation-logging controversy in the broader highlands).
- Defend S  t  tla Highlands National Monument. The Conservation Alliance (visitation; the three-year management-plan requirement).

THE MOUNTAIN PINE BEETLE (FOREST SCIENCE)

- The Effectiveness of Vegetation Management Practices for Prevention and Control of Bark Beetle Infestations. Fettig, Klepzig, Billings, Munson, Nebeker, Negr  n & Nowak, *Forest Ecology and Management* 238 (2007): 24–53 — a U.S. Forest Service synthesis drawing on nearly 500 studies across western and southern U.S. conifer forests. This is the primary support for the point that reducing stand density lowers a stand's susceptibility to bark beetles.
- Within-Stand Distribution of Tree Mortality Caused by Mountain Pine Beetle. Jos   F. Negr  n, USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, *Insects* 11(2) (2020): 112 — a focused study showing beetle mortality concentrates in the densest part of a stand and that restoration leaving clumps of large trees can stay susceptible. Used here as a spatial example only: it is a small, 1997, Colorado ponderosa-pine study, so it transfers only roughly to Medicine Lake's high-elevation lodgepole and is not a stand-alone basis for the thinning case.
- Mountain pine beetle. Wikipedia — general biology: the female-initiated mass attack, the blue-stain fungus, the green–red–grey progression, cold-winter limits, the climate-driven intensification of outbreaks, and the scale of recent epidemics in British Columbia and Colorado.

A community information briefing. Prepared by Christopher Knorr, Pit River Tribal member · June 2026 · chrisknorr.mail@gmail.com

This is an unofficial community resource, not an official notice and not legal advice. The Medicine Lake Caldera Vegetation Treatment Project is administered by the Modoc National Forest; the S  t  tla Highlands National Monument's status is contested and

evolving. Please verify time-sensitive details — closures, comment periods, and the monument's legal standing — directly with the Forest Service and the Pit River Tribe.