

North Fork Eel River Forest Health Revealed

The Eel River Recovery Project (ERRP) is sponsoring an evening presentation by retired Six Rivers National Forest Archaeologist Thomas Keter on the state of North Fork Eel River watershed forest health. The presentation is the first of a series and will take place at the Willits Environmental Hub at 630 South Main Street at 6:30 PM on Saturday, January 27.

Tom Keter explored the North Fork Eel River watershed for over a decade and joined the U.S. Forest Service's first efforts to map vegetation on computers to be able to explore relationships and track conditions over time. He drove the back roads and walked hundreds of miles to "ground-truth" the data being developed for the first geographic information system (GIS) maps, and along the way made some remarkable discoveries.

The North Fork has some of its headwater areas in the snow zone and they are naturally dominated by conifers. However, what Keter discovered was that lower elevation forests that were historically dominated by oaks were being out-competed by incursion of Douglas fir. Similarly, meadows and grasslands were diminishing as Douglas fir encroached. The reason for the succession is that Native American burning practices were banned 150 years ago and they had kept the fir in check.

Controlled burns were used to maintain grasslands as forage for animals and medicinal use, and oak forests were nurtured not only for the animals but because they provided acorns that constituted a staple of indigenous people's diet. The change in vegetation has also had a profound impact on water supply, as shallowly rooted young Douglas fir can be very consumptive of water. Tom Keter collected historic photos of spring areas and then photo-documented changes with fir encroachment. He also conducted an oral history project where he interviewed ranchers who used the springs, and they confirmed diminished flow. Cumulatively, it is likely that the successional changes at a watershed scale may be diminishing summer base-flow in the North Fork Eel River.

There will be a question and answer period after the presentation to discuss the pros and cons of forest health projects to reverse current successional trends and to restore the watershed to its former more productive state. The doors of the Hub will open at 6 PM with hors d'oeuvres, beer and wine served. No charge for admission or refreshments but donations welcome.

Anyone with questions can call Robin Leler in Willits at 459-0155 or ERRP Managing Director Pat Higgins at 707 223-7200. Follow ERRP on Facebook or go to www.EelRiverRecovery.org where you can access Keter's paper on North Fork Eel River forest health.



**Mixed conifer and oak woodlands grow on the hillside above the North Fork Eel River below Hulls Creek.
6/6/16.**