

Chapter 10: Smith River-Gasquet, California

Photo: Julia Sizek

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Case study facts

Population (2020): 3,239

Location: Del Norte County, California

Federal forest lands (84% of study area):
Gasquet Ranger District, Six Rivers National Forest

Climate:

Average Annual High: 59.7 °F/Low: 44.6°F
Annual Precipitation: 71.5 inches;
Snowfall: 0.0 inches (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2021)

Approach

We conducted social and economic monitoring of eight rural communities (<15,000 residents) within the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) area. We used a case study approach involving analysis of qualitative interviews (Figure 10.1), literature review, and descriptive summaries of selected secondary data. All interviewees worked in, resided in, or had social or economic ties to the Smith River-Gasquet study area. Quotes in these reports are from interviews conducted in 2024. Each case study can be read as a standalone report. Chapter 1 provides a full introduction and methods including case study selection, interviewee sampling rationale, and secondary data analyses.

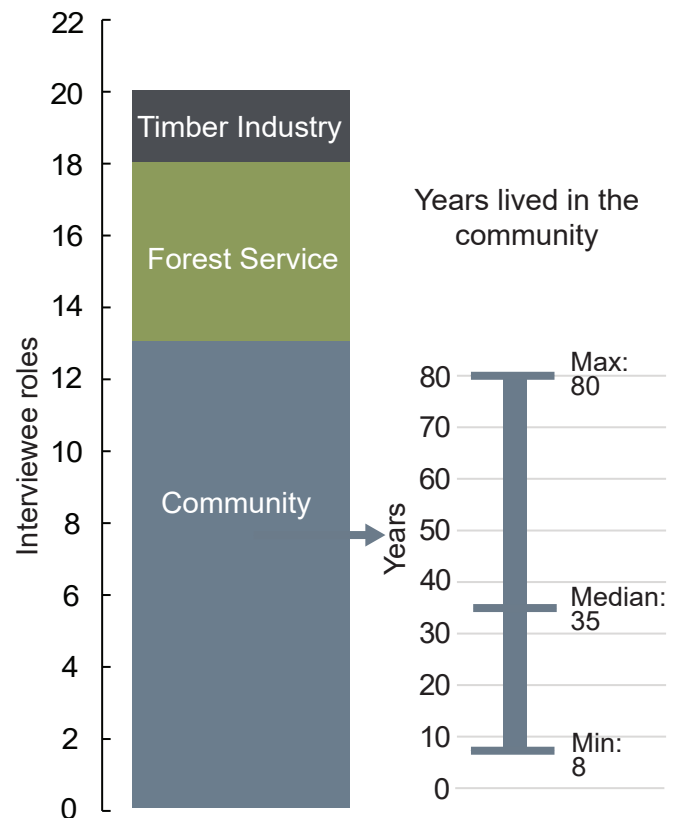


Figure 10.1. Graph of interviewees by role and number of years lived in the community. Our sample included thirteen community members, five Forest Service employees, and two timber industry representatives. Community member interviewees lived in the study area for a minimum of eight years, a maximum of 80 years, and a median of 35 years.

Study area and geography

The Smith River-Gasquet case study focused on the Gasquet Ranger District-Smith River Recreation Area in the Six Rivers National Forest, California. We spatially defined the local community as the Smith River-Gasquet CCD (Figure 10.2). The study area consists of rural portions of Del Norte County including the unincorporated, census designated places (CDP) of Smith River, Hiouchi, and Gasquet (pronounced “Gas-key”). All three communities are located along the Smith River or its forks. As of the 2020 US Census, Smith River was the largest CDP with 906 residents; Gasquet had 657 residents, and Hiouchi had 314 residents. Crescent City, approximately 10 miles southwest of Hiouchi, is the county seat of Del Norte County and is the only incorporated city in the county. In addition to Forest Service-managed lands, the National Park Service and California State Parks jointly manage Redwood National and State Parks within the study area. Forests in this region consist largely of mixed evergreen forests including Douglas-fir, white fir, a variety of hardwoods, and stands of redwoods along the coast. This region also includes serpentine chaparral areas. The Gasquet Ranger Station is located in Gasquet.

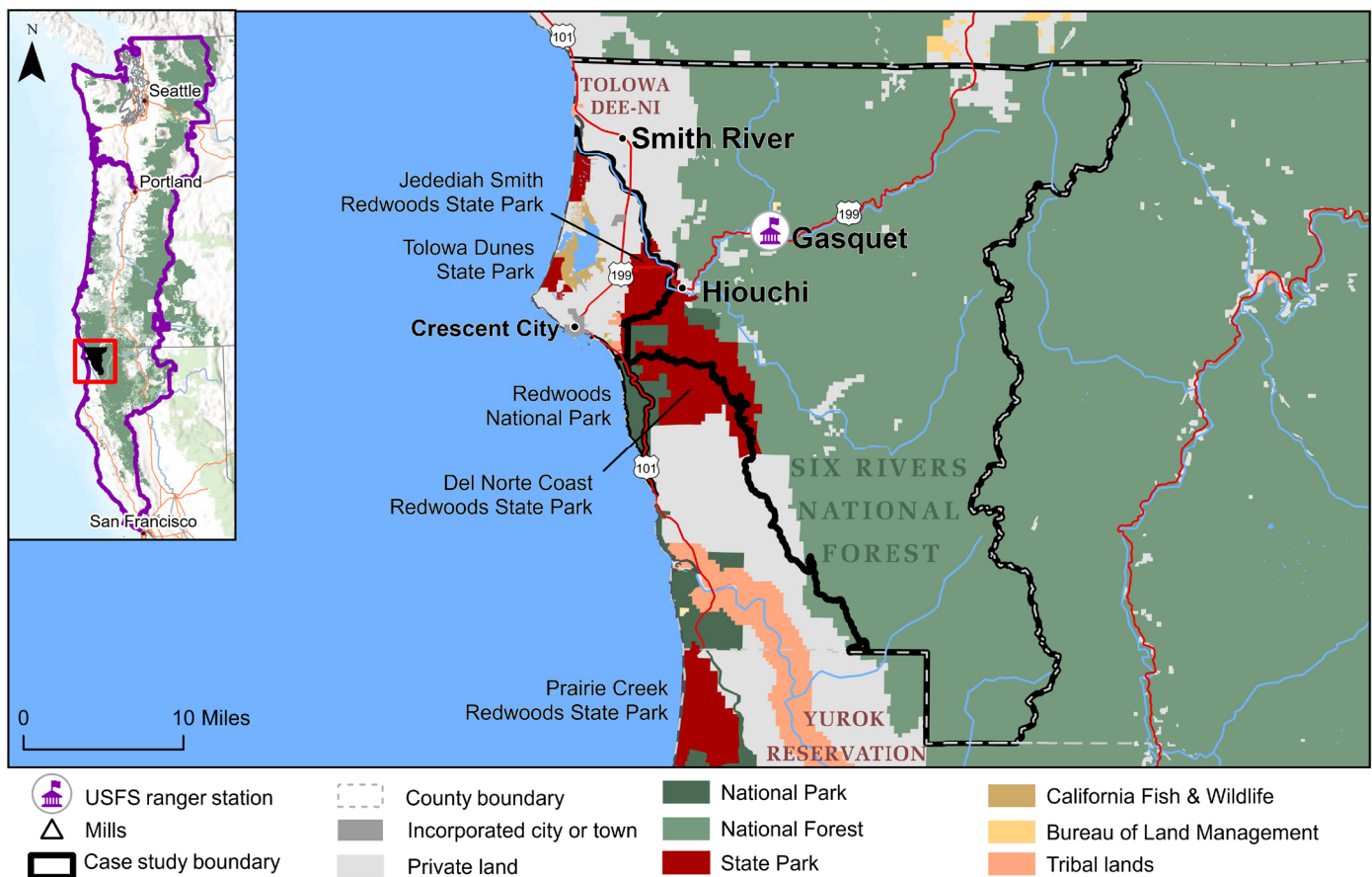


Figure 10.2. *Smith River-Gasquet community case study area.*

Shared sense of place

While Smith River and the Tolowa Dee-ni' Reservation are coastal and agricultural, the communities of Hiouchi and Gasquet are inland and forested areas. Residents of the study area see their climate as distinct from adjacent Crescent City: “We [Smith River] have an interesting microclimate where it gets considerably

warmer and less windy than it does in Crescent City...you can have fruit trees in your yard.” Others commented that the weather could be cold in Crescent City and warm in Gasquet: “Loosely calculated, it’s like a degree per mile as you drive west. 80 degrees in Gasquet, it’ll be 60 in Crescent City.”

Residents of Smith River identify their community as being more diverse than others in the county. *“Smith River is... the most diverse community probably in the county because of the migrant workers and then... second generation immigration... and the Tribe. Del Norte County and Northern California is... really white, so it’s sort of nice that this [Smith River] has a little more diversity.”* Gasquet residents see their community as a typical small town: *“Gasquet is a very quiet little town. We have our [Gasquet Bible] church. We don’t have a gas station. We have a little store, a post office.”*

Points of interest

Redwood National and State Parks

The Northern California coast is home to Redwood National Park, Del Norte Coast Redwoods State Park, Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park, and Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park. The 38,982 acres of ancient coast redwood forest makes up approximately 35% of all old-growth redwood forests remaining in the world (National Park Service, n.d.a.). According to the National Park Service, there were approximately 410,000 visitors to Redwood National Park in 2023. Visitor spending that year supported 384 local jobs and contributed almost \$38 million to the local economy (National Park Service, 2004). In 2024, visitation numbers increased to 622,883 (National Park Service, n.d.b.).

Smith River National Recreation Area

The Smith River National Recreation Area (NRA) is located in the Six Rivers National Forest and is a popular recreation area, particularly for fishing, rafting, or hiking. As California’s only remaining undammed river (USDA Forest Service, 2026), the Smith River is protected under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. Its designation as a NRA confers additional protections to the ecological diversity, clear waters, and cultural resources within the Smith River watershed.

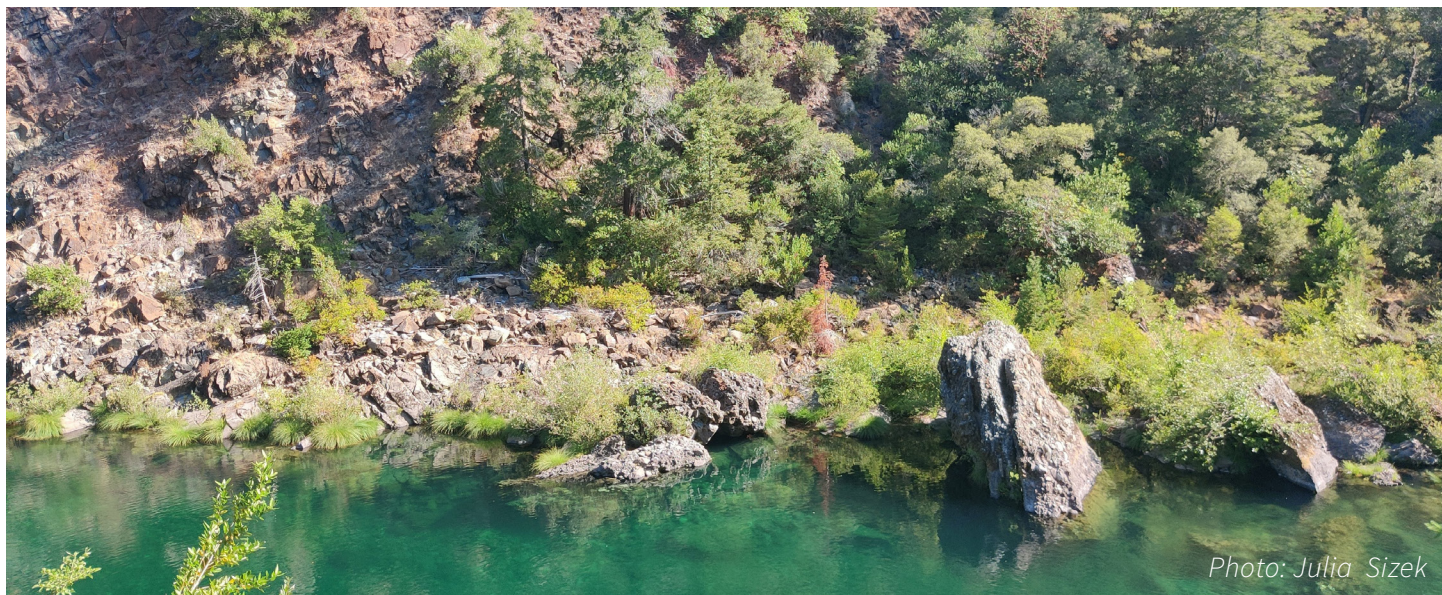


Photo: Julia Sizak

Smith River

The litigation era and the NWFP: a summary of local impacts

In the late 1980s, conservationists began to raise public awareness of the destruction of old-growth forest habitat by logging in the Pacific Northwest. Public protests and legal actions soon focused attention on the northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*), whose habitat was threatened. During the “litigation era”, beginning in 1989 with a temporary legal injunction on federal timber sales in the Pacific Northwest and culminating with the implementation of the NWFP in 1994, timber harvest decreased significantly on federal forests in Northern California, western Oregon, and western Washington. Unrelated to these events, in 1990, the Smith River NRA (and accompanying management plan) was created within the Gasquet Ranger District. Along with the spotted owl-related injunctions on logging, these two changes eliminated almost 60% of proposed timber sales areas on the Six Rivers National Forest (“Timber Sales Reduction Expected in Six Rivers Forest,” 1990).

This section provides a summary of the direct impacts of these events on the social and economic wellbeing of the Smith River-Gasquet study area. In the sections following this summary, we situate these impacts within the study area’s pre-NWFP history (including settlement and post-World War II timber industry) and on-going changes in the community’s wellbeing following 30 years of the NWFP.

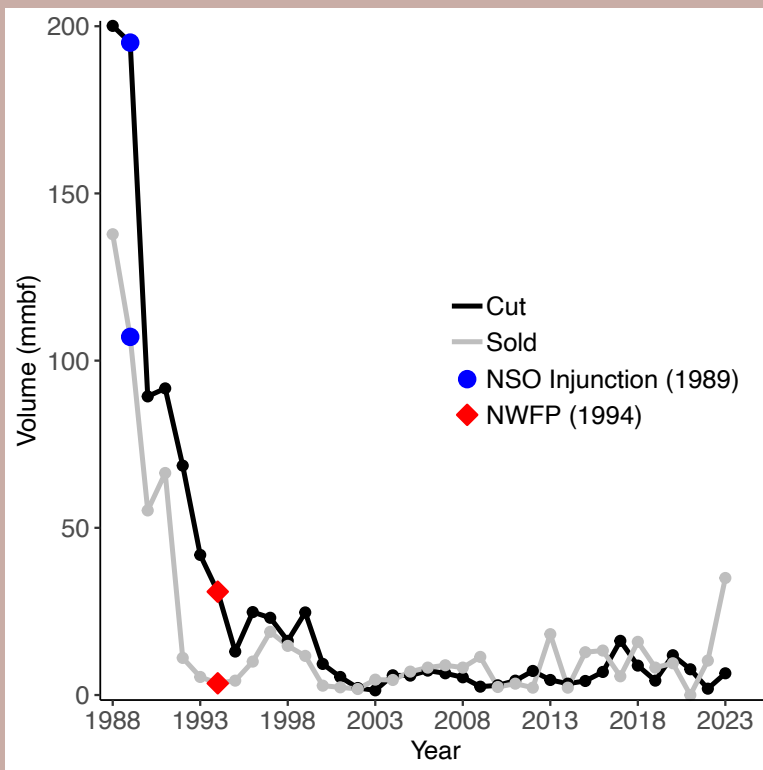


Figure 10.3. Line graph showing timber harvest and sales (“cut” and “sold” volume in million board feet) for the Six Rivers National Forest, federal fiscal years 1988 through 2023. Landmark 1989 temporary injunction on timber sales in NSO (northern spotted owl) habitat in federal forests in the Pacific Northwest and 1994 implementation of the Northwest Forest Plan indicated by blue dots and red diamonds respectively (USDA Forest Service, 2025).

Harvest volumes on the Six River National Forest fell from 200 million board feet (mmbf) in 1988 to 13 mmbf in 1995, a drop of nearly 95 percent (USDA Forest Service, 2025).¹ Harvest volume continued to fall, reaching a low of 1.4 mmbf in 2003. Over the next two decades, harvest volumes varied between approximately 2 to 16 mmbf averaging approximately 6 mmbf annually until 2023 (Figure 10.3).

In the memory of community members we spoke with, the designation of the Redwood National and State Parks (1968 and expanded in 1978) and Smith River National Recreation Area (NRA) (1990) were more significant events for local social and economic wellbeing than the Northwest Forest Plan. The Smith River and its tributaries were also designated as a National Wild and Scenic River prior to the spotted owl injunctions and the NWFP. This designation limited development and logging along the river corridor (including lands managed by the Forest Service) and the Smith River NRA management plan covers most of the remaining portions of the Gasquet Ranger District. Some interviewees thought that the NRA and Wild and Scenic River designations were more prescriptive for Forest Service land management than the NWFP.

1. USDA Forest Service cut and sold data reported in federal fiscal years.

Pre-NWFP history

Settlement

Tolowa peoples have lived in northwestern California and southwestern Oregon since time immemorial (Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation, n.d.b). Spanish explorers and traders may have visited the area as early as the 17th century. The first documented visit by Euro-Americans occurred in 1828 when Jedidiah Strong Smith (i.e., the “Smith” of Smith River) led a group of trappers to the area. Early non-Indigenous settlement of the area came primarily by sea during the Gold Rush in the early 1850s. In 1853, J. F. Wendell, established Crescent City on the site of a Tolowa village. Before the year ended, there were approximately 300 houses and 800 people in the former Indigenous settlement (Bearss, 1969).

In the summer of 1853, Euro-American settlers massacred Tolowa people at Yan'-daa-k'vt (Yontocket), a village on the south bank of the Smith River, while they were engaged in ceremony. In the massacre, between 450 and 500 people from Taa-'at-dvn (outside Crescent City), Tolowa people from Yontocket, and Tututnis from southern Oregon, were killed (Akins & Bauer, 2022; Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation, n.d.a.).

After the 1853 massacre, some Tolowa people were relocated to reservations in Northern California and Oregon (Tushingham & Brooks, 2017). Tolowa peoples were additionally impacted by U.S. Army actions in the 1855-1856 Rogue River Wars to the north (Tushingham and Brooks, 2017). The Tolowa signed a peace treaty with the government of Del Norte County in 1857, however, hostilities between Euro-American settlers and Indigenous residents continued as many Indigenous peoples in the area remained legally landless (Slagle, 1987). The Smith River Reservation and a U.S. Army outpost (Fort Lincoln) were established within the study area in 1862 (Ruhge, 2017). After local Euro-American settlers destroyed Indigenous crops and livestock and threatened to force the Native Americans from their reservation homes, the U.S. Congress eliminated the Smith River Reservation in 1868 (Slagle, 1987). Decades later, in the late 1920s, the Smith River and Elk Valley Rancherias were federally recognized (Slagle, 1987). Both Tribes lost this federal acknowledgement in 1960 when the federal trust relationship was terminated by the U.S. Government. Federal recognition was restored in 1983 following settlement of the Tillie Hardwick class action lawsuit, overturning the 1960 termination (Wood, 2008). As of 2024, the Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation was the only federally recognized Tribe within the Smith River-Gasquet study area.

Early economic development of the study area was facilitated by ocean transport as roads were difficult to build and maintain along California's northern coast (Bearss, 1969). An early stagecoach route established in 1854 was abandoned due to high costs and maintenance challenges (Bearss, 1969; Bledsoe, 1881). Mining was important to the early development of the study area. Nearly all private land holdings in Gasquet were originally titled as mining claims (Keter, 1995). During the Civil War, mining transitioned from panning for gold to more capital-intensive mining operations for copper, chromite, and manganese (Chase, 1959). By 1865, more destructive hydraulic mining techniques predominated. Later, as copper demand waned, mining declined (Keter, 1995).

By 1880, the population of Crescent City was 2,669 people, which included large populations of Chinese and Native American inhabitants (each comprising approximately 10% of the population). Both groups faced significant discrimination from the white population (Bledsoe, 1881), while also working for the mining industry in the study area (Keter, 1995). In 1881, Crescent City businessman, Horace Gasquet (namesake of the Gasquet CDP), relied on Chinese workers to build a road along the north and middle forks of the Smith River (Wey, 2004). The road became known as the Gasquet Toll Road and served mining camps along the

Smith River and its tributaries as well as Gasquet's "Health Resort" (Keter, 1995). The county purchased the road in 1904, and by 1930, the Forest Service began maintaining it.

Railroad connections to major population centers were never developed, and the Redwood Highway was not completed until 1923. US-199, which connected Crescent City to Grants Pass, Oregon and the Rogue River Valley, wasn't completed until 1929 (Bearss, 1969).

Early timber industry

As early as 1853, water-and horse-powered sawmills began processing timber from the study area to meet local lumber demand (Bearss, 1969). Timber export industry began in 1869 when the Crescent City Mill and Transport Company constructed a mill. Two years later, Hobbs, Pomeroy, and Company (later Hobbs, Wall, and Company), opened a competing mill and box factory in Crescent City (Bearss, 1969). By 1880, the local lumber industry was booming, focused primarily on exporting redwoods via boat to San Francisco and other coastal areas (Oswald, 1970; Buckley, 2000).

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the timber industry grew and redwood production from coastal Northern California dominated the state's timber harvest. Timber companies in and around the study area were operating primarily on private lands with high-value redwoods (Fischer, 1967; Poli, 1956). Three large export companies dominated the local industry: (1) Hobbs, Wall, and Company, (2) J. Wenger and Company (successor to the Crescent City Mill and Transportation Company) and (3) Hume, Westbrook, and Bomhoff (Bearss, 1969). The latter company constructed a mill within the study area at the mouth of the Smith River in 1882, but the mill closed soon after due to the shifting river channel which made timber transport difficult for the company.

Between 1880 and 1893, Hobbs, Wall, and Company expanded from 6 to 8.5 mmbf per year, logging private timberlands between Crescent City and Smith River (Bearss, 1969). They operated two mills, one on Lake Earl, north of Crescent City, and one on Elk Creek in the South. Harvested lands were converted to pasture rather than replanted, as the company aimed to provision its 300-to-400-man workforce. By the early 1890s, the company constructed the Crescent City & Smith River Railroad (a common carrier) to transport logs from the logging camps to the mills and the processed wood from the mills to the wharf. In 1894, the railroad reached Smith River and enabled the former Hume, Westbrook, and Bomhoff mill in Smith River to reopen under new ownership (Bearss, 1969).



Truck hauling, Hobbs, Wall & Co, 1935

In 1903, Hobbs, Wall, and Company acquired the J. Wenger and Company mill on Lake Earl. The company continued to expand, and by 1908 it began construction on the Del Norte & Southern Railroad to access timber in the study area southeast of Crescent City (Bearss, 1969). By 1909, the mill in Smith River closed, allowing Hobbs, Wall, and Company to monopolize timber supply in the county. Although Hobbs, Wall, and Company continued to focus efforts on logging old-growth redwoods for the next two decades, they also met demand for Sitka Spruce (used in early airplane construction) during World War I (Bearss, 1969).

In 1939, Hobbs, Wall, and Company suddenly closed their operations (Bearss, 1969). The closure may have resulted from the unionization of the company's workforce (Gibson, 2019). However, since Crescent City lacked a railroad connection to the national transportation network, local timber industry was also limited by the high cost of ocean-based transportation (Fischer, 1967). The ensuing quiet period in timber harvesting and processing did not last long. Timber demand during World War II induced a rapid expansion of industry in the study area. The population of Del Norte County doubled between 1940 and 1952 with the influx of timber industry capital, loggers, mill workers, and truck drivers (Bearss, 1969).

Post-World War II timber industry

Between 1945 and 1947, the number of sawmills in Del Norte County expanded from three to 11 (Conners, 1998). By 1954 there were 40 logging, lumber, and plywood companies operating in the county (Oswald, 1970). The county's harvest numbers grew from 53 mmbf in 1946 to 300 mmbf in 1953 (Bearss, 1969). This dramatic increase was due, in part, to the creation of the Six Rivers National Forest in 1947, which aimed "to bring forestry to an area long neglected and where it was badly needed" (Conners, 1998). Initial reception to the Forest Service's control over timber was not positive, as many accused the Forest Service of hampering sales. However, the new units did result in an increase in logging on federal lands, specifically on harvesting Douglas-fir (Conners, 1998).

California's timber production peaked in 1955 with the northern coastal area accounting for 55 percent of the state's production (Oswald, 1970). Douglas-fir accounted for most of the increase even as redwood harvest increased annually from 1947 to 1956 (Oswald, 1970). Following the peak of Douglas fir production in the 1950s, redwood production continued to increase into the mid-1960s. Despite harvests on the national forest, private timberlands remained important during after World War II (Oswald, 1970): nine companies owned approximately 140,000 acres of private timberlands in Del Norte County, with five companies owning the majority of those holdings (Bearss, 1969).

In addition to lumber, coastal Northern California also served as the center of plywood production during the 1950s and 1960s (Oswald, 1970). In Crescent City, Northern California Plywood operated between 1952 and 1967, and the Standard Plywood Company operated between 1954 and 1975 (McKeever and Meyer, 1984).

By 1954, approximately half of Del Norte County's labor force worked in the timber industry (Bearss, 1969). Employment in the timber industry peaked in California in 1955, dropping 20 percent by 1968 due to mill closures (Oswald, 1970). In Del Norte County 13 mills closed in the 1950s, and another 13 closed in the following decade (McKenzie-Bahr, 1994b).

By the 1970s and early 1980s, the timber industry was in local decline, a result of both broader economic conditions and the expansion of Redwood National Park in 1978 (see below). In the 1970s, eight mills closed in Del Norte County and another five closed in the 1980s (McKenzie-Bahr, 1994b). One interviewee noted that, *"people from Del Norte County [will say that]... the creation of Redwood National Park was certainly a very controversial thing that happened in the [19]60s and expanded in the [19]70s."* By 1992, federal officials estimated that only 350 people, or 5% of Del Norte County's workforce, remained in the timber industry (Crawford et al., 1993).

Local news reporting in the 1990s (McKenzie-Bahr, 1994b), as well as two of our interviewees, suggested that the timber industry was effectively dead in Del Norte County by the 1980s. A few community interviewees thought that the designations of state and national parks impacted timber harvest in the study area more

than the NWFP: *“The Northwest Forest Plan, obviously wasn’t the big piece that set this mess in motion. It was also the establishment of Redwood National and State Parks.”*

Conservation, recreation, and tourism

In 1905, the Smith Fork District (renamed the Gasquet Ranger District in 1933) was created as part of the Klamath National Forest (National Park Service, 1998). In 1911, the district was transferred to the Siskiyou National Forest, headquartered in Grants Pass, Oregon (USDA Forest Service, 2009; Conner, 1998). However, timber harvesters remained focused on privately held redwood forests.

As redwood logging was increasing in the early twentieth century, nascent conservation concerns began to gain political traction. The Save the Redwoods League was founded in 1918. This organization initially focused on establishing California State Park units to conserve old-growth redwood forests (Conners, 1998). Humboldt Redwoods State Park was established in 1921, Prairie Creek State Park in 1925, Del Norte Coast Redwoods State Park in 1927, and Jedediah Smith State Park was established in 1929 (and expanded in 1939) (Bearss, 1969). Following the success of redwood conservation efforts, ponderosa pine lumber from California’s interior forests began to replace redwood as the dominant wood production species in the state (Oswald, 1970).

By the 1930s, the federal government decided it wanted to have greater control over the redwood timber market and moved to acquire private timber lands in Del Norte County (Crabtree, 1974; Conner, 1998). Although the federal government planned to acquire up to 263,000 acres, they only successfully acquired 14,491. This forest was administered by the Gasquet Ranger District until 1968 when it was included in the establishment of Redwood National Park (Hudson, 1978).

The Six Rivers National Forest was created in 1947, combining portions of the Siskiyou, Klamath, and Trinity National Forests. At the time of its establishment, the Six Rivers National Forest had 63 campgrounds with 405 units that could accommodate 2,675 people, and the vast majority of these were on the Gasquet Ranger District, which had 49 campgrounds with 295 units that could accommodate 2,265 people (Conners, 1998). Throughout the 1950s, recreation was aided by the development of new roads that supported timber production and increased access to the forest (Conners, 1998).

Redwood National Park was established by eminent domain in 1968, and the 58,000 acres of park lands were acquired from private timber-owners Arcata Redwood Co., Simpson Timber Co., Miller-Rellim Redwood Co., and Georgia-Pacific Corp (Hudson, 1978; Schrepfer, 1980). The establishment of the Redwood National Park was controversial locally, as many saw it as a strategy to crush the thriving local timber industry that they saw as the first viable industry in the region (“LBJ Stabs DN in Back,” 1966). At the time, Del Norte County’s economy was highly dependent on timber with up to 85% of residents directly or indirectly reliant on the lumber economy (“Redwood Mill Is Near Opening,” 1966).



Logging by Arcata Redwood Company, 1975

In 1978, President Carter expanded Redwoods National Park by 48,000 acres despite continued opposition from the timber industry (National Park Service, 2024). At the time, approximately 25% of Del Norte County's labor force worked in timber (Crawford et al., 1993). To counter the negative impacts of the expansion on people working in the timber industry, the U.S. Congress created the Redwood Employee Protection Program to provide workers with monetary and nonmonetary assistance over a six-year period (Crawford et al., 1993). While approximately 3,500 people received severance payments across Humboldt and Del Norte Counties, fewer than 13 percent enrolled in retraining programs. Of the 432 people who undertook retraining, 139 of them relocated. In advance of the Northwest Forest Plan, the U.S. General Accounting Office conducted an audit of the Redwood Employee Protection Program (Crawford et al., 1993). The audit found that the program had limited success. Many timber workers took advantage of the program during seasonal layoffs, maintenance shutdowns, or other adverse conditions, but later returned to the industry (Crawford et al., 1993).

Smith River and five of its tributaries have been designated as Wild and Scenic Rivers under California law in 1972 (Conners, 1998). In 1980, 314 miles of the Smith River and its tributaries were added to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (Conners, 1998). Both designations contributed to the eventual development of the Smith River NRA in 1990. Reaction against a proposal to mine Gasquet Mountain that could have impacted local waterways provided additional political pressure in support of the NRA designation (California Nickel Corporation, 1983). When the Smith River NRA was established, the U.S. Congress debated whether to place it under control of the Forest Service or Park Service. Congressional designation put the Smith River NRA under the control of the Forest Service, but also legislated a written management plan (Conners, 1998). The NRA management plan limited timber harvest on the Gasquet Ranger District (Conners, 1998). Unsurprisingly, the management limitations associated with the NRA designation were controversial in the community. One interviewee shared that local residents had initially called the NRA, the *"no recreation area."* However, the relationship between the Forest Service and the community has improved since that time. Interviewees generally saw the Smith River NRA designation as emblematic of a shift *"towards recreation as a primary economic driver, away from industry."*

Smith-River after the NWFP

Employment and industry

Interviewees offered mixed perspectives on whether the number of jobs in the study area changed in the last 30 years. However, industries in the study area have changed. As one interviewee put it, *"It has gone more from a resource dependent... to being more tourism and government employee employment, and more recently, the tourism over the last few years."* Five interviewees mentioned that government jobs (e.g., with Pelican Bay State Prison, Redwood National and State Parks, or the county government) were the major employers of the county. The prison, which opened in 1989, continues to be a particularly important driver of the local economy in Del Norte County (Reiter, 2018).

Since the 1990s, Del Norte County has been dependent on federal and state government employment with a large percentage of the population employed in the public sector (Pender, 2015). As mentioned in one oral history collected in 2018, "We either work for the Del Norte Unified School District, the city, the county, the Pelican Bay Prison, or law enforcement" (Rhodes, 2018, p. 208).

Eight interviewees reported on the decline of the timber industry over the last 30 years. Even the most vocal proponents of the timber industry suggested that the industry was *“not going to come back the way it was.”* Miller Redwood, the last old-growth redwood mill in Del Norte County, closed in 1994 (McKenzie-Bahr, 1994a). Nonetheless, that same year, loggers harvested approximately 90 mmbf private lands in Del Norte County (McKenzie-Bahr, 1994c). By 1996, two more mills in Crescent City closed and unemployment peaked at 23.8% (Curtius, 1996). Fifty percent of timber workers in Del Norte County left the area due to this downturn (Crawford et al., 1993).

In 2002, the Save the Redwoods League purchased the Mill Creek land tract (approximately 25,000 acres) previously owned by Stimson Lumber Company, and subsequently deeded it to the state of California (Gray, 2002; Larimer, 2002; Grimes, 2002). To counter local concern about the loss of timber-yield and property taxes, Stimson and Save the Redwoods League created a \$5 million annuity for the county (Gray, 2002). In 2012, Hambro Particleboard, the last mill in Del Norte County, closed permanently, and a year later the mill burned down (Cejnar, 2012; Cejnar, 2013). In 2024, the closest remaining timber processing facilities to the study area were in Brookings (50 miles north in Curry County, Oregon) and Eureka (150 miles south in Humboldt County, California).

Tourism

Seven interviewees commented on the rise in tourism in Del Norte County over the last few decades. As one interviewee noted, *“people come from all over the world and country to visit places like Jedediah Smith, Redwood State Park, Redwood National Park, of course, [and] Smith River National Recreation Area.”* Another interviewee mentioned that it felt like the promise of economic benefits from the national park were not delivered: *“Redwood National Park and supposed promises that were made, you know, with the number of tourists that would come and stay in the park...those things weren't delivered.”* Interviewees also commented that Del Norte County did not capitalize on tourism as much as Humboldt County. However, interviewees thought the county's efforts to promote tourism in the 2000s were successful in increasing visitation to the study area.

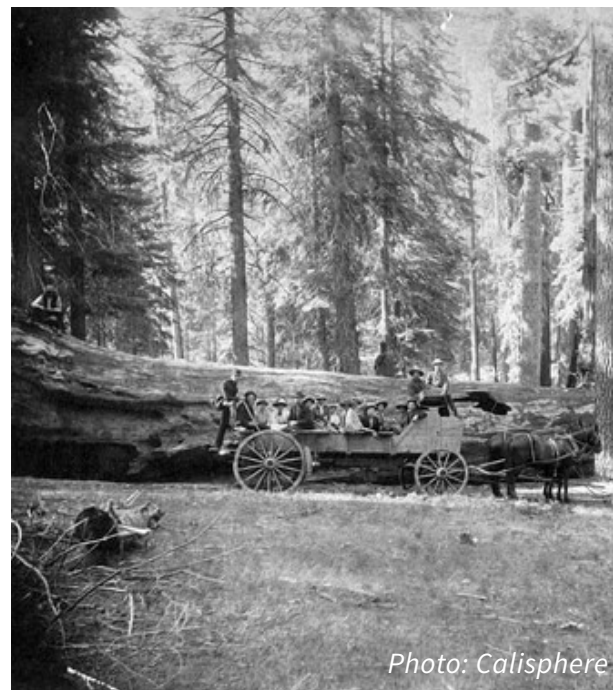


Photo: Calisphere
Early tourists visit fallen sequoia, late 1800s

Prison

In the mid-1980s, rural communities across California were competing over the siting of prisons as a new way to boost their economies (Reiter, 2018). Del Norte County made a successful bid for Pelican Bay State Prison which opened in 1989. While the prison was not universally popular among Del Norte County residents, many civic leaders supported its construction (Cates, 1984). They often pointed to the loss in employment and mill closures in Crescent City during the early 1980s as a reason to site the prison in their community (Del Norte County Citizens Steering Committee, 1985). They thought the prison would offer stable job opportunities to the community (Heiser, 1985). Opponents to the prison often noted that the prison would have a negative impact on the tourism industry and cited environmental concerns (Rohe, 1985; Heiser, 1985).

Many locals warily accepted the prison as it reshaped the local economy and population. When asked how the study area had changed since the implementation of the NWFP in 1994, one interviewee said *“what really changed is the Pelican Bay Prison came [in]. [Del Norte County] was such a small community. That single thing really changed the community for a long time.”* Another interviewee noted that the prison provided employment after other industries had left: *“It was [a] mill and fishing town, yeah, now the prison actually coming in probably is the only thing that saved it, because those are the highest paying jobs in the county.”*

However, when the prison opened, as few as 20 percent of employees were local hires (Reiter, 2018). An early 1990s report area employment noted that approximately 1,200 employees and their families moved to the Crescent City area when the prison opened, contributing to the growth of Del Norte County’s population from 15,100 people in 1971 to 27,000 in 1991 (Crawford et al., 1993). Families of prisoners also moved to Crescent City (Rhodes, 2018). Local population increases associated with the prison likely attracted new businesses such as the Wal-Mart in Crescent City (Groves, 1993).

In 2024, the prison continued to be an important local employer, employing approximately 1,070 people, many of whom live in the study area (California State Controller’s Office, 2024). Many interviewees considered the community to be dependent on prison employment and worried that the study area lacked a future without a more diverse economy. As one interviewee noted, if the prison were to leave, it would *“fundamentally change the economics of our already disadvantaged community.”* Another interviewee stated: *“We’re just raising a bunch of COs [Correctional Officers] like, that’s your best opportunity for a job here.”* The prison is such an important employer that interviewees in Smith River noted that prison employees commuted from as far away as Brookings or Cave Junction to work.

Other industries

Easter lily farming came to Del Norte County in the 1970s and 1980s (Andrews, 2024c). In 2024, there were three lily bulb producers in Smith River that collectively farmed approximately 200 acres, though the industry was previously larger (Andrews, 2024c). In the early 2020s, the industry was criticized for the negative impacts of pesticides and agricultural runoff on the area’s water (Andrews, 2024c). In 2024, three interviewees noted declines in the local lily bulb industry, and of those, two noted this decline would be beneficial for watershed health because of the industry's use of pesticide.

Demographic and community changes

The total population of the study area declined between 2000 and 2020 (Table 10.1). Low-income populations and populations aged 25-44 also declined, while populations 65 and over increased, nearly doubling.

Interviewees thought that the main changes in the community included new people moving to the study area. Although the census data shows a net decline in population, interviewees mostly agreed that new people were moving to the study area (n=7). Interviewees described *“new people”* as families, retirees, wealthy, immigrants, teleworkers, and city people. Interviewees thought that new residents were attracted by the natural beauty of the place and its recreation opportunities, the appeal of rural living, and job opportunities at the prison.

Table 10.1. US Census and American Community Survey demographic estimates for 2000, 2010, and 2020. See Appendix D for complete citations.

	2000	2010	2020	Trend
Total population	3,754	3,321	3,239	Decreased
Low-income population*	1,747	1,284	958	Decreased
% Low-income population	47%	39%	30%	
Population aged 25-44	899	677	697	Decreased
% Population aged 25-44	24%	20%	22%	
Population aged 65 or older	678	696	1,078	Increased
% Population aged 65 or older	18%	21%	33%	
*For low-income population, 2010 is an ACS 5-year estimate for 2008-2012 and 2020 is an ACS 5-year estimate for 2018-2022.				

Retirees began to arrive in Del Norte County, resulting in net in-migration that was “*unrelated to the area’s timber production,*” in the 1970s (California Nickel Corporation, 1983). While four interviewees mentioned an increase in retirees in the study area, they also noted that Brookings, Oregon and not Smith River, was seen as the primary retirement destination. Some interviewees thought that retirees only moved to Del Norte County because Brookings was “*starting to get overcrowded.*”

Housing

Eight interviewees thought that housing had become less affordable and available in the area. Three interviewees suggested that housing was a major barrier to local economic development: “*If people can't move here to open a new business or offer their skill set to the community then like, well, then we're at a disadvantage.... People can't move here to get started.*”

Interviewees noted a shortage of low-income housing across the county. In 2023, the County was awarded \$7.5 million to create 160 units for low-income families and seniors in Crescent City (Lincoln, 2023). However, as of 2024, outside of Crescent City, there were no large-scale housing developments to improve the availability of homes.

Five interviewees noted that vacation rentals and second homes had negatively impacted the availability of housing stock. Interviewees commonly thought that most property purchases were not for long-term residents: “*So even the houses that are here being purchased by people that aren't coming here to live in them, they're going for short-term vacation rentals.*” Over the last 10 years, Del Norte County supervisors debated whether to regulate vacation rentals in unincorporated areas (Bosetti, 2021). In 2022, the County supervisors decided to monitor, but not limit, short-term rentals, which grew from

131 to 196 between 2017 and 2022² (Andrews, 2022). The county's 2024-2025 strategic plan raised the possibility of regulating short-term rentals (Del Norte County, 2023), but, as of late 2024, no new regulations had been passed. One 2024 interviewee thought the lack of regulation was because the local representatives *"don't like to limit people's opportunity to do this or that. I think they would just assume that we have more housing created to offset what's lost through the short-term rentals."*

Community services

Community interviewees agreed that services (including restaurants, health care, gas stations, grocery stores, and personal or business services) in the study area either decreased (n=5) or did not change (n= 3) since the implementation of the NWFP in 1994. In 2024, Smith River, Hiouchi, and Gasquet did not have many services. According to interviewees, Ray's Food Place (a supermarket) in Smith River closed in the last decade, and *"a couple of restaurants"* also closed during that time. In 2024, there was a taco food truck and a burger place, and the post office remained open. Gasquet had a small grocery store and a post office. Five interviewees mentioned the high turnover of restaurants in the study area. Some residents of Smith River, Hiouchi, and Gasquet mentioned that they often needed to go to Crescent City, Grants Pass, or Brookings for services or medical care. Community amenities are summarized in Figure 10.4 below.

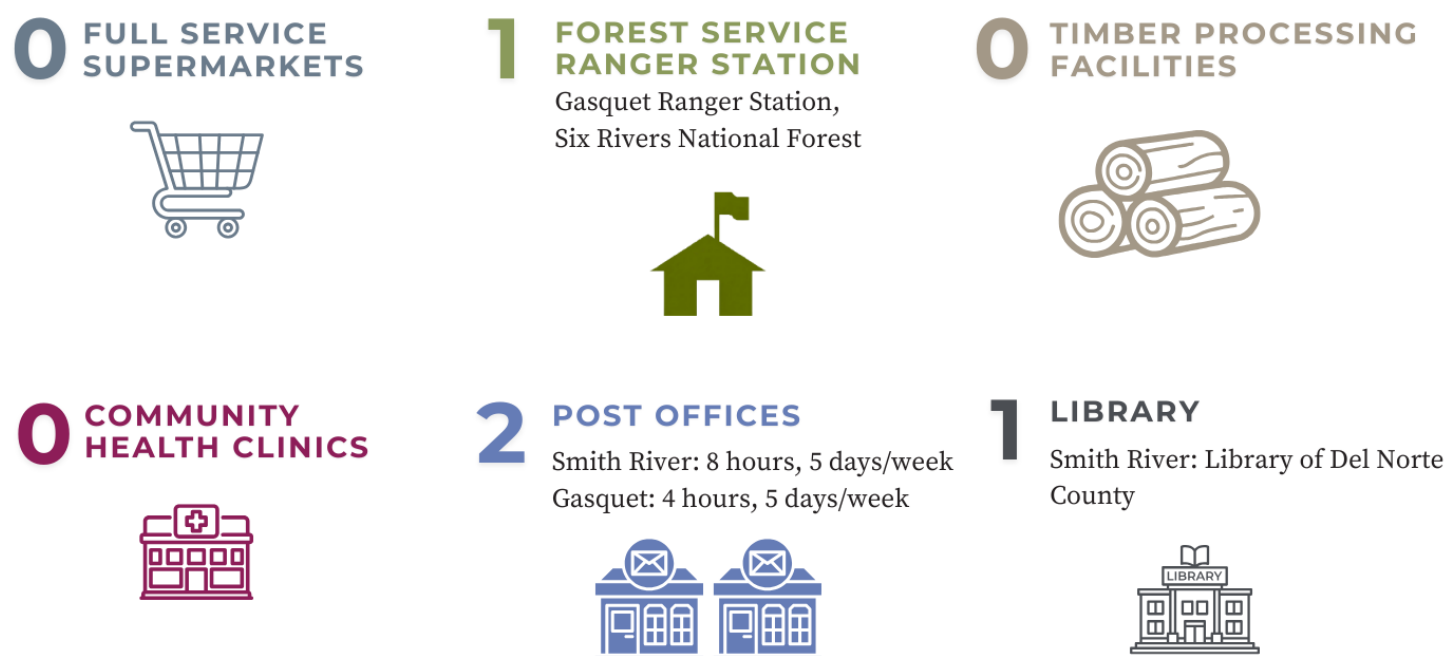


Figure 10.4. Community amenities in the Smith-River study area. Includes: zero full-service supermarkets (other locations that accept SNAP benefits, such as gas stations or convenience stores, not included), one Forest Service ranger station, zero timber processing facilities, zero community health clinics, two post offices, and one library.

Community relationship with the Forest Service

Five community interviewees thought that the relationship with the Forest Service was positive, while one thought it was negative, and one thought it was divided. Community members also spoke to how

2. An internet search in October 2024 yielded 41 short-term rentals in the study area (one of three CCDs in the County).

this relationship changed over time: two thought that there was a positive change since 1994, and two thought that there was a negative change. Three interviewees described how the relationship with the Forest Service depended on the individual district rangers leading the office. As one interviewee stated, *“When I’m feeling good about my work with the Forest Service is usually when they’ve got excellent leadership, and that leader and I are working together. When they have leadership that I don’t respect as much, then the relationship can become strained.”* Interviewees spoke about the impacts of agency staffing and funding levels on this relational dynamic between the Forest Service and the community. Two interviewees mentioned that the Forest Service staff noted how staffing shortages negatively impact their ability to work. While one interviewee thought this was related to Forest Service-specific hiring practices, another saw this as a more universal issue across federal and state agencies.

The Smith River Collaborative, a local *“initiative to advance habitat restoration, fuels treatment, and other projects across the National Recreation Area,”* is highly involved in management of local Forest Service lands. One interviewee noted that the Collaborative works to fill gaps from staffing and budget shortages. One interviewee who has followed the Collaborative’s work noted, *“the collaboratives are completely genius, and whoever thought of that should get, like, a Nobel Peace Prize or something, because it really works well.”* An agency interviewee described the Collaborative as highly important to their work.

We asked community interviewees about their views on Forest Service management priorities (Figure 10.5). Interviewees thought that incorporating science into planning processes (67 percent) and managing for wildfire resilience (60 percent) were high priorities for the Forest Service. Interviewees were either neutral or unsure (50 percent) of the importance of socioeconomic well-being of local communities as a Forest Service management priority.

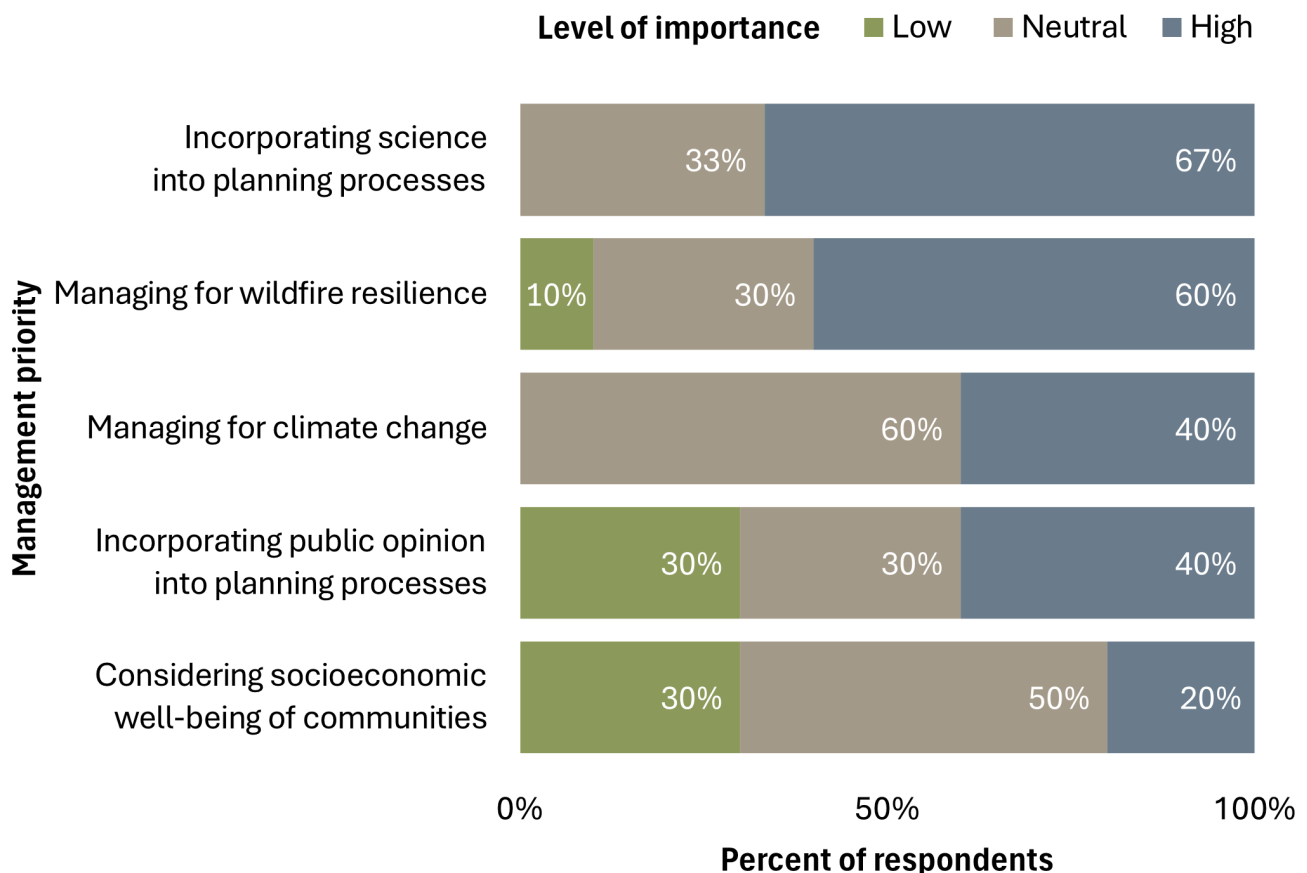


Figure 10.5. Community perception of Forest Service management priorities (n=10). Bar graph segments represent the percentage of interviewees indicating level of importance (Low, Medium, High) of each management priority.

Tribal partnership

While the Forest Service primarily interacted with the Indian Service (renamed the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1947) rather than Tribes during the early decades of the Six Rivers National Forest, the agency has since formalized government-to-government relationships with four federally-recognized Tribes and eight Rancherias that use the Six Rivers National Forest: Yurok, Karuk, Hupa, Round Valley Indian Tribes; and the Elk Valley, Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation (formerly known as Smith River Rancheria), Resighini, Big Lagoon, Trinidad, Table Bluff, Rohnerville, and Blue Lake Rancherias (Conners, 1998).

As of 2024, the Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation had active partnerships with the Forest Service, including a 2020 hazardous fuels reduction project (California Climate Investment-Fire Prevention Funding from CalFire) in and around the communities of Gasquet, Big Flat, and Rock Creek. The project was staffed by the Nation's Tribal Resources Field Crew (Tolowa Dee-Ni' Nation and Six Rivers National Forest, n.d.). Overall, the project constructed around 1,613 acres of fuel breaks, and interviewees credited the fuel breaks with saving the town of Gasquet during the Smith River Complex Fire in 2023.

Forest Service staff saw themselves as *“among one of the leaders in the country”* for how they worked with Tribes on land management. Forest Service staff noted that, in 2024, Tribal collaboration efforts meant that the office was more competitive for grants, even though the Gasquet Ranger District was not part of a priority landscape under the Wildfire Crisis Strategy.

Community relationship with national forest lands

Most interviewees thought that nature and aesthetics were of high importance to the community (73 percent). Water, hunting, fishing, and tourism were also rated highly (Figure 10.6). About half of interviewees thought that recreation and non-timber forest products were of high importance to the community. Most interviewees ranked timber as medium to low importance to the community.

Recreation and roads

When asked to list popular types of recreation in the study area, interviewees mentioned water-based recreation (e.g., kayaking, rafting, swimming) (n=7), fishing (n=5), off-highway vehicles (n=4), hunting (n=3), hiking (n=3), mountain biking (n=3), and camping (n=1).

Hunting and fishing have long been important to the study area. As one interviewee put it, *“everybody that seems kind of halfway happy to be here either hunts and fishes, like a lot, like it's a part of their life, or, you know, for tribes, that's also like subsistence.”* Some interviewees suggested that sport fishing had declined in the study area. As one interviewee explained, this was partly due to the relative proximity of the Chetco River in Oregon, where fishing regulations were less stringent: *“Those are California Department of Fish and Wildlife changes that have resulted in a lot of the outside money that would have been spent here to fish going 10 miles north into Oregon on the Chetco River.”* Interviewees expressed hope that they could bring the fishery back, however, they also noted that *“there's so many factors, ocean conditions, ocean trawling, you know, all of it has taken its toll.”* Nonetheless, interviewees noted that there was still an active guiding industry in the study area.

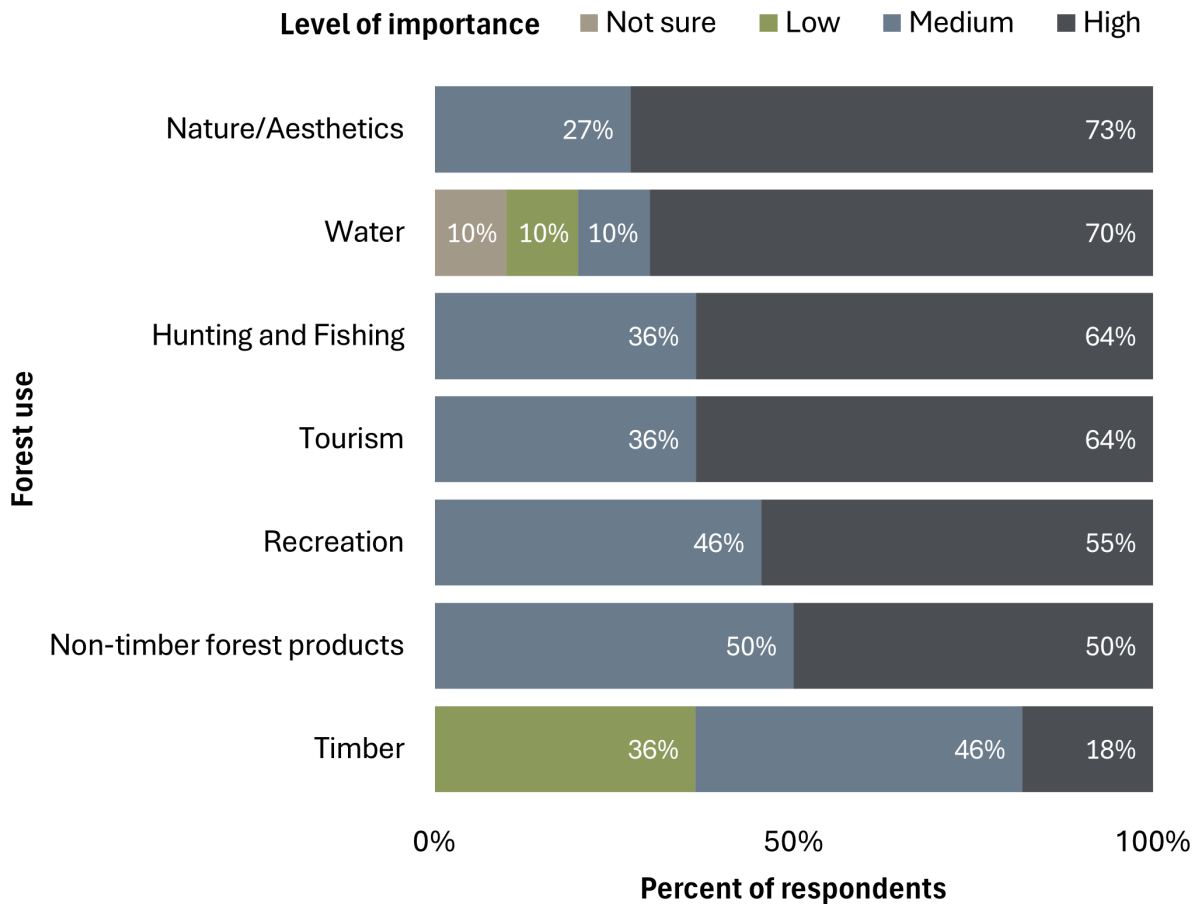


Figure 10.6. Importance of national forest uses to the community (n=11). Bar graph segments represent the percentage of interviewees indicating level of importance (Not sure, Low, Medium, High) of each forest use to the community.

Interviewees also suggested that both recreation and tourism were essential. One interviewee said about the study area, the “*bucolic Six Rivers National Forest...and the NRA...[is] the crown jewel on top of the forest.*” Another added that “*it [the Smith River NRA] attracts people from all over the world to recreate here.*” Interviewees mentioned that the study area was also attractive to birders and those interested in seeing rare botanical species (e.g., *Darlingtonia*, a rare carnivorous plant).

Because vehicular recreation in the neighboring national and state parks is limited, many users recreate in the national forest and, specifically in the Gasquet Ranger District. In 2017, the Gasquet Ranger District completed a travel management plan that designated roads and trails for vehicular use. (USDA Forest Service, 2017).

According to one interviewee, there were also many complaints among locals about trails, campgrounds, and other maintenance. A growing community of mountain bikers were particularly concerned about trail maintenance. Community members understood this issue as a lack of agency budget and staffing. As one interviewee put it: “[*The Gasquet Ranger District*] *didn't have enough infrastructure within this agency to even apply for the money to do more things.*” Regardless, interviewees shared that local residents appreciated that the ranger district was successful in putting in a new boat ramp.



Coastal Dunes at Yontocket

Non-timber forest products

Between 2013 and 2023, the Six Rivers National Forest sold 43,882 gallons of mushrooms for a total of \$16,553 (USDA Forest Service, 2025). The forest also sold 102,000 pounds of unspecified “fruits and berries”, 135,000 pounds of limbs and boughs (such as incense cedar and fir), and 341,000 pounds of foliage (such as ferns and bark). Christmas trees and fuelwood were also popular with over \$155,000 in Christmas tree permits and nearly \$236,000 in fuelwood harvesting permits.

Non-timber forest products were especially important for local Indigenous communities and Hmong Americans who resettled to the study area after the Vietnam War. Hmong Americans rely on the forest primarily for food products, and are active mushroom foragers, hunters, and fishers. Indigenous communities use many non-timber forest products like hazel, ferns, spruce roots, cedar bark, and redwood. One Forest Service employee noted that Indigenous peoples were the “*largest user group*” for non-timber forest products. According to Forest Service interviewees, Tribal members had concerns about the quality of some non-timber forest products. For example, acorn supply is threatened by Sudden Oak Death and the quality of hazel, a traditional basket-making plant, is negatively affected by the lack of traditional management.

Timber

From 2013 to 2023, the Gasquet Ranger District sold five timber sales (excluding commercial fuelwood) with a total volume of 12 mmbf (USDA Forest Service, 2023). Sales occurred in 2013, 2017, and 2020. Conventional timber sale contracts went to two logging contractors based in Oregon (less than 2.5 mmbf) and two sawmills in California (4.2 mmbf). The largest sale (5.5 mmbf) was a stewardship contract with the Mule Deer Foundation based in Salt Lake City, Utah. The smallest sale, purchased by a business based in Cave Junction, Oregon (approximately 38 miles from the study area), was 52,000 board feet. All other businesses purchasing timber were based at least 100 miles away from the study area.

Many interviewees agreed that timber was seen as locally important by some members of the community. However, according to one interviewee, *“for the longest time, our local leaders held out for more logging.... it’s only in the last five years, I would say, that that kind of pressure is finally ended.”*



Salvage logging near Little Jones Creek

Wildfire and other forest disturbances

Interviewees noted that they believed catastrophic wildfires were a new development in the community threatening both the national forest and the well-being of local communities. Five interviewees expressed that firefighting was the most important Forest Service policy for local community members.

Interviewees noted that the recent Smith River Fire Complex was one of the most impactful forest disturbances in recent years. The Smith River Complex burned 95,107 acres in August 2023 (National Interagency Fire Center, 2023). During the fire, evacuations were widespread, with the entire town of Gasquet under an evacuation order. As one Gasquet resident recalled, *“We had to go to Crescent City, to the fairgrounds. We filled up the whole town, every hotel in town. We were there for three weeks. Couldn't come home at all.”*

The Smith River Complex was particularly devastating for local infrastructure, as mentioned by nine interviewees. Highway 199, a scenic highway that connects Crescent City to Grants Pass, was closed because of the fire and post-fire landslides (Andrews, 2023). The two redundant power lines that power Crescent City run parallel to this highway, so residents lost power for weeks. When power was restored, residents had to rely on a diesel-powered microgrid for nearly a month (Toohey, 2023). As a result, some have proposed having a planned microgrid for future emergencies or providing a redundant powerline from Curry County (Andrews, 2024b).

The impacts of the Smith River Complex were dramatic on local people and businesses, and a survey conducted by the University of California Cooperative Extension estimated that residents spent \$1,790 more because of the fires (from costs related to, for example, buying a generator or auxiliary power, evacuating, and spoiled food) and businesses spent around \$6,371 more, which did not include additional losses from lack of tourism during the peak season (Dompka, 2023). Interviewees mentioned that both they and their friends and neighbors lost refrigerators and freezers full of food. One community leader mentioned that many people held barbecue gatherings to cook and share food supplies before they went bad.

Local reporting has suggested that fuels reduction projects at Pappas Flat and Big Flat protected Gasquet, Washington Flat, and Little Jones Creek from widespread wildfire destruction (Andrews, 2024a). Five interviewees mentioned that, as a consequence of increased wildfire risk, community members had already lost private insurance or were concerned about losing it in the near future. Many interviewees noted that they used the California FAIR (Fair Access to Insurance Requirements) plan, the state-run fire insurance program, or knew people who did.

Other forest disturbances

Landslides are another common forest disturbance in Del Norte County and have been a chronic issue along Highway 199. Study area residents used this highway extensively to travel to Grants Pass for medical care or large shopping trips. Periodic landslides have closed the highway or created one-way traffic patterns along significant road stretches, increasing travel times. One resident recalled her experience: *“You had to get in line at six o'clock in the morning...They'd let 20 cars go. Then, they stopped all that traffic, and you had 20 coming back this way. That went on for almost a year.”*

Community futures

Wildfire (n=8), climate change (n=3), and recreation (n=2) were viewed as the biggest changes in the community's future by community members and Forest Service employees. While some interviewees commented on the ongoing impact of the Smith River Complex Fire, others commented that there would be more fires. Three interviewees mentioned that they were not optimistic about wildfire mitigation efforts, stating that, *"even if the restrictions were limited or removed wholesale... we've built up forest fuels for 80 years, and we're not going to get that undone in five years."* Aside from that, there was little consensus about future changes in the study area – interviewees mentioned groundwater, wind energy, changes in the prison, and infrastructure issues.

Conclusions and case study highlights

The Smith River study area was impacted by several waves of conservation policies prior to the implementation of the NWFP. From World War II through the 1960s, the timber industry gained importance for the study area. The creation of the Redwoods National Park, the designation of the Smith River as a National Wild and Scenic River, and the establishment of the Smith River NRA each impacted the potential timber supply from federal lands while also opening new economic opportunities related to tourism and recreation. Although timber processing facilities began to close in the 1970s, several plants remained open through the mid-1990s. Even though local timber supply had already been constrained by previous conservation efforts, after 1994, the implementation of the NWFP further limited region's timber harvests. These additional supply constraints may have contributed to the closure of remaining wood processing facilities in Del Norte County. Since the 1990s, the opening of the Pelican Bay Prison provided some stability in employment for the study area. Tourism also offers economic benefits to the study area. However, some community interviewees felt the potential for tourism associated with national and state parks and recreation areas remained underdeveloped.

Smith River key forest management takeaways

- The aesthetic and scenic value of the forest, water quality, fisheries, and general tourist appeal of the Gasquet Ranger District/Smith River NRA are of high importance to the local community.
- Community members may no longer expect a timber program to return; however, wildfire risk and its mitigation are of increasing concern to the community.
- Tribal collaborations have been successful on the Gasquet Ranger District and may serve as a model for other national forest units.
- Managing for wildfire resilience will continue to be an important consideration for the community's future.

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Crescent City lighthouse and town

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