

# Are forest thinning critics in a time warp?

03/17/2005



There's an essay picking up steam on the Web titled "Why the environmental movement is dead."

It's primarily an exercise in overstatement, but it is gaining traction because of its laundry list of take-no-prisoners stands adopted by environmental groups when the stakes don't justify such extremism. The public knows the difference between storing radioactive waste alongside the Colorado River and draining Lake Powell, but some in the conservation movement apparently don't, and they jeopardize support for an entire movement through continuing acts of intransigence.

To that sorry list we can add the ongoing resistance by the Sierra Club and Southwest Forest Alliance to comprehensive forest restoration efforts in northern Arizona. To read their press releases, these two groups have never seen a forest that wasn't "old growth" nor a thinning plan that wasn't "commercial logging." It's as if they are caught in a 1950s time warp before NAU founded a restoration forestry program and began sending many of its graduates to the Forest Service.

The latest project to raise their ire is a 30,000-acre thinning and burning plan for the North Kaibab centered on the community of Jacob Lake, the gateway to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. It's an area that has been heavily logged and grazed, and, combined with decades of fire suppression, the forest is clogged with spindly pines and mushrooming ground cover that makes it prone to catastrophic crown fires.

The plan calls for thinning most trees less than 12 inches in diameter - they make up 92 percent of the timber stand. The remaining 8 percent are trees up to 24 inches in diameter, and some will be removed on overly dense tracts to give a range of trees a chance to compete for sunlight and limited water.

Predictably, the Sierra Club and Southwest Forest Alliance object to thinning any tree over a foot in diameter and use the buzz word "old-growth" as if the Forest Service was planning to log virgin forest.

If they had their way, only half the trees planned for thinning would be removed, regardless of how dense that left some stands.

Frankly, the case could be made that more, not fewer, trees should be cut in the interest of not having to go back in sooner with another round of thinning. Professor Wally Covington of NAU has advocated in previous projects a more aggressive thinning strategy on the basis of test plots he has studied for two decades right on the North

Kaibab. So far, the Forest Service has not adopted quite so radical a plan, but mainly because the public is not ready to accept a forest with just 30 to 40 trees per acre, as existed in pre-settlement days.

So the North Kaibab plan, as with similar restoration and wildfire prevention projects on the Coconino National Forest around Flagstaff, calls for leaving 70 to 100 trees per acre in a forest where densities can range up to 300 and 400 trees per acre. To get down to that number, some trees larger than a foot in a diameter will have to be cut.

As for old-growth, these are pines older than 120 years that have become fire-resistant -- their yellowish trunks are not easily ignitable. Thus they survive typical forest fires that kill smaller trees and brush as long as the fires do not reach up into their crowns. Typically, old-growth pines are at least 18 inches in diameter and larger, but they are primarily identified by their yellow bark.

Will some old-growth ponderosas be cut on the North Kaibab? Probably. Is such logging a threat to the old-growth forest? With a cutting cap of 24 inches, how can it be? The plan calls for cutting larger pines only in areas where they are competing for water. Unless critics want an even-aged, plantation-style forest, some trees of all sizes will need to be cut to open the forest canopy and assure that there are replacement stands when the older trees die.

Thinning our overgrown ponderosa pines for the sake of forest health and wildfire prevention has never been more critical. In part, that urgency is due to past mismanagement by the Forest Service. But the days when the Forest Service was out to high-grade the best timber for the sake of commercial logging interests are long-gone. Environmentalists who dig in their heels on the basis of an outdated stereotype actually lose traction with a public that can see the modern forest for the trees. It's time the Sierra Club and Southwest Forest Alliance took a closer look, too.