

# Years of overlogging, fire suppression hit

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U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt today praised research and efforts by Northern Arizona University and the Grand Canyon Forests Partnership to restore overgrown, unhealthy ponderosa pine forests in Arizona by thinning and reintroducing fire cycles.

Babbitt said the scientific foundation for restoration has been laid by NAU foresters and researchers and that the time to begin "scaling up" projects has come, despite criticism from some environmentalists who oppose any logging on public and private lands.

Generations of grazing, overlogging and fire suppression have jeopardized the health of nearly 200 million acres of forests in the inland West. Active restoration as envisioned by NAU's Ecological Restoration Institute is needed to reverse the situation, Babbitt said.

"We can't walk away from the consequences of our actions," Babbitt told more than 300 NAU faculty, students, government land managers and scientists attending a national forest restoration summit at the duBois Conference Center.

Babbitt said besides returning the forests to healthier conditions, thinning and removing fire fuels is crucial in order to stop catastrophic fires from destroying congested forests. Western fires in 1994 that claimed the lives of 14 federal firefighters and the 1996 blaze north of Fort Valley that destroyed hundreds of acres near Flagstaff are proof positive that restoration is a public safety issue, he added.

"You have the knowledge, you have the answers ... it's time to lead," Babbitt told the audience during a 30-minute speech on restoration efforts under way across the nation, as well as the effort to "treat" 100,000 acres of ponderosa pine forest in the Flagstaff area.

So far, efforts by the Grand Canyon Forest Partnership and the U.S. Forest Service to begin restoring 1,700 acres in the Fort Valley area have been blocked by environmental activists such as the Forest Guardians of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Recently the Forest Service rescinded its decision approving the Fort Valley logging project after opponents argued successfully that a 30-day public comment period had not been conducted by the government.

Backers of the restoration, such as the Grand Canyon Trust, say the setback is temporary and the restoration will move ahead in 90 days after a new decision is issued by the Forest Service.

Forest Guardians and the Flagstaff Activists Network oppose restoration based on large-scale logging of public lands saying it damages wildlife habitat, cultural resources and recreation resources in the forest.

Babbitt advised supporters of forest restoration not "to lose your nerve" when confronted by environmental groups.

"You're going to hear from the theologians of wilderness ... that it's a capital sin to cut a tree," Babbitt said, adding, "My friends, we don't have that option."

Babbitt said the Flagstaff area project can be used as a model to improve forest health across the west.

The Interior Secretary also likened the local effort to other restoration efforts across the country such as the plan to revive the Everglades and bring salmon back to the rivers of central California.

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