



Test plots are carved out in Kaibab forest

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WILLIAMS -- The odor of fresh-cut pine lingered and chainsaws roared in the background as a group of state and local officials walked among the leveled stumps and remaining trees in a forest thinning area a few miles northwest of Williams.

The Williams District of the Kaibab National Forest invited the dignitaries -- including a representative from Gov. Janet Napolitano's office -- to watch a forest-thinning project in action on Thursday. Forest Service representatives hosted the event to educate and to show them the work that has taken place under the Kaibab's Rural Community Fuels Management Partnership.

"What I see here is the beginning," said Williams city manager Dennis Wells, who has worked with the Forest Service and spoke before the tour. "We are at the beginning of treating thousands of acres of forest. The negative is the sheer size of problems in treating these lands."

The tour made its first stop not at a tract of Forest Service land, but at the house of retired U.S. Air Force Col. Hugh Matheson. Matheson requested that the Partnership, which also involves the Arizona State Land Department and the Coconino Rural Environmental Corps. to conduct the thinning on his land.

Matheson's more than a dozen ponderosa pines remained on his property, but most of the canopy was opened up with the thinning project. The crew also cut the stumps down to the level of the ground, so it was hard to tell where trees once stood.

"The only places you see where there are stumps are trees I cut down," Matheson quipped.

The difference in forest density across the property line were significant. Trees less than five inches in diameter grew in clusters, with their crowns touching.

Five of Matheson's neighbors, seeing the work done, have also signed up for forest thinning on their land, he said.

The group also toured demonstration plots taking place on 10 acres of undeveloped private land owned by the Wells family, which is west and adjacent to the Elephant Rocks Golf Course. The Partnership is studying the plot to determine if a full restoration project or a modified version is best for the Williams area.

In the full restoration area, eight to 14 trees are being left behind per acre. In the modified study area, about 18 to 21 trees per acre will be left behind. Some test burning will take place once the cutting is complete to see how each of the project areas, which includes a control area with no cutting, will fair.

The Ecological Restoration Institute, based at Northern Arizona University, is involved in the demonstration project.

Representatives on the tour, such as Northern Arizona Governor's Office director Virginia Turner, received packets of information and graphs and breakdowns of all of the work taking place on the ground. Turner said she was going to report to the governor's office in Phoenix about the work taking place in and around Williams.

"The governor is committed to forest health," Turner said. "She's very interested in these kind of collaborative partnerships."

In one of the more interesting collaborations to thin trees on people's property, the Partnership has worked with the "Inmate Wildland Fire Crew," made up of inmates of the state prison in Winslow. The crew has been utilized in forest thinning efforts in areas further east of Williams.

"Inmates with chainsaws sounds pretty scary, but we haven't had any problems with the inmates," said Kevin Boness, who works with the State Land Department. The inmates help keep the project costs down. They can cost as much as \$400 to \$500 an acre, Boness said.

While the Forest Service and its partners have celebrated the work accomplished, including the clearing of more than 100 acres of thinning on private property since 2001, members of the agency and area officials recognize the continuing challenge.

"Man does not have much control," said Williams City Council member and Forest Service retiree Cary Price, speaking about forest fire. "Our feet are against the fire."

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