



## Canyon won't cut big trees

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GRAND CANYON -- Grand Canyon National Park has unveiled a scaled-back version of a forest thinning plan that caused a public outcry in 1999.

Early indications are the new plan, which involves cutting small-diameter trees and no wood sales, is meeting approval from even the staunchest opponents of logging on public lands. The project is aimed at safely managing hazardous forest fuels while protecting old trees and other resources.

And it's coming at a prime time to prevent fires in what Park Senior Scientist Robert Winfree says are dramatically overcrowded forests.

"In some areas, tree density is 300 to 400 percent more than it once was," he said. "When you have fires now, you run the risk of damage to the resources, especially old trees." Winfree said the trees of greatest concern -- which can anchor healthy, old-growth forest systems -- are generally 120 years old or older.

The park's original proposal three years ago outlined one treatment that would have cut trees up to 16 inches in diameter. In the current proposal, the most severe treatment only takes out trees 5 inches in diameter or smaller -- and no trees will be sold; they'll all be burned on site. The plan also outlines tight restrictions for work done in study plots on the North Rim, which fall inside a proposed wilderness.

"They have done a lot of what we asked them to look at," said Sharon Galbreath, director of a local activist group called the Southwest Forest Alliance. Galbreath had called the Park's original proposal a front for commercial logging. On Monday, she gave the new proposal the thumbs-up.

The experiment will encompass 160 acres evenly divided between the park's North and South rims.

Each 80-acre block will be divided into four 20-acre units, each undergoing one of four treatments: Intermediate thinning and burning, where most trees less than 5 inches diameter at breast height will be cut and then the areas will be burned; minimal thinning and burning, where thinning of 5-inch and smaller diameter trees will be targeted around trees about 120 years old or older, then the areas burned; burn only; and control plots where the forest is left alone.

What's been stripped is the more drastic treatment proposed in 1999, which would have felled trees in several size classes, the largest of which went up to 16 inches in diameter.

"That would have been our preference, but the park had to respond to social concerns," said Diane Vosick, a senior program representative with the Ecological Restoration Institute at Northern Arizona University. The ERI has fueled much of the forest

restoration work in areas around Flagstaff, including providing the science and much of the funding behind the Fort Valley Ecological Restoration Project, a large-scale experiment just north of Flagstaff.

Wally Covington, an NAU forestry professor and researcher with the ERI, usually advocates more drastic treatments. He says they bring forests closer to their natural conditions before the long-term wildfire suppression that left them vulnerable to catastrophic fire and disease.

Vosick said the 5-inch cut cap will still be useful to the ERI because it will add to its data about the effects of various treatments on ponderosa pine and other types of forests.

The ERI has provided much of the initial funding for the Grand Canyon project, and is contracted to monitor the forests for at least five years following the treatments.

From the Park's perspective, Winfree said the research will be used to evaluate and refine techniques for reducing hazardous fuels in wildland-urban interfaces, to learn to prepare defensible perimeters for burn units and reduce wildfire spread beyond Park boundaries; and to protect sensitive and cultural resources.

Winfree said the proposed treatment areas have been "100 percent surveyed for archeological resources" and none was found. Mexican spotted owls and condors are known to use the areas, but work crews will be instructed to stop work if one of the birds visits.

"If a condor comes, we'll stop the treatments until it decides to leave," he said.

The South Rim experimental site is located in the Grandview area east of Grand Canyon Village. The North Rim site is located on Swamp Ridge northwest of the North Rim developed area. The sites represent different forest types within the Park; the South Rim site is primarily a ponderosa pine/oak site, while the North Rim is pine/fir.

The North Rim site is located within a proposed wilderness area, so the research has been designed to reduce impacts by using only hand tools and retaining all cut trees with no wood leaving the experimental site. No skid trails, landings or additional roads will be created.

The research will also be useful to inform future thinning projects, although "we don't ever expect this would turn into a broad-scale thing," Winfree said. Rather, the park will likely treat its forest in spot areas that are particularly overcrowded or otherwise vulnerable to fire damage. Limited treatment is already under way in the Bright Angel Pass area, and other projects are being planned.

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