

## Institute pegged for permanent funding

By GARY GHIOTO

*Sun Staff Reporter*

01/08/2003



Under legislation introduced Tuesday in the U.S. Senate, Northern Arizona University's Ecological Restoration Institute will be funded each year by Congress and expand its research programs and wildfire prevention and forest thinning projects.

If passed, the bill will provide a consistent source of funding, estimated at between \$5 million and \$6 million annually, for NAU, said Wally Covington, president of the Ecological Restoration Institute.

"This is a major, major deal for Northern Arizona University and for the state of Arizona," said Covington, "Arizona is being asked to lead the way nationally in getting science-based forest restoration on the ground rapidly."

U.S. Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., filed the "Southwest Forest Health and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2003" Tuesday as one of the first pieces of legislation to be taken up by the 108th Congress.

The bill authorizes \$15 million annually for the "establishment of ecological restoration institutes in Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado."

"The institutes will work with land managers, environmental scientists and local governments to implement forest-protection treatments, such as thinning and controlled burnings, to reduce the number of wildfire outbreaks and lessen their severity should fires break out," said a statement from Kyl's office.

Covington said ERI will work cooperatively on forest research and other projects with the Colorado and New Mexico institutes. NAU's institute will be a model for the other university-based institutes.

Kyl's bill ensures that each year ERI's budget will be reviewed by Congress, said Diane Vosick, associate director for policy and administration at the institute.

"This way we are an actual item in the federal budget and so it makes it easier each year to get an appropriation, but that's not to say it's guaranteed. But we want to be in the budget for long-term security," said Vosick.

Covington said if the bill is passed, ERI will see its budget increase significantly.

"This will enhance our funding by about 30 to 40 percent. I would like to emphasize, too, that the funding doesn't just come to the university. We send a lot of the money out to collaborators to get treatments done on the ground," said Covington.

Covington said the extra funding and ERI's prominence will make a difference in the pace of restoration projects in the Flagstaff-area.

"What we hope to see is an acceleration of work around Flagstaff and building a similar capacity around the state -- the White Mountains and the sky islands we have around Arizona," he said.

Kyl, who has been working on forest thinning issues since 1994, said the bill is on the fast-track for passage in the Senate and House.

"Arizona simply cannot afford another catastrophic fire season, and we must take prompt action to protect our fragile ecosystem habitats and national forests," said Kyl in a prepared statement. "The federal government must give a higher priority to preventive efforts that will reduce the risk of uncontrolled wildfires. This bipartisan legislation is a step in that direction."

The legislation is also sponsored by Sens. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M. and Pete Domenici, R-N.M.