

State teams with N.M., Colo. to protect local forests

By HOWARD FISCHER

Capitol Media Services

06/14/2005



PHOENIX -- Arizona is pooling its higher education brainpower with Colorado and New Mexico to help protect the forests in the region.

A deal inked Monday by Gov. Janet Napolitano in Colorado will create the Southwest Ecological Restoration Institute. That will combine the work of Northern Arizona University with the University of Colorado and New Mexico Highlands University.

Napolitano said this is an extension of work already being done at NAU.

"It's kind of a major regional approach now so that our forest-treatment plans are all science based," the governor said.

She said the other two universities also have a great deal of expertise. More to the point, Napolitano said, there are common issues -- and common problems, citing "that huge swath of ponderosa pine" that cuts across all three states.

The governor compared it to the mutual aid agreements that already exist among the states to fight fires.

"This is, in a way, to have mutual aid agreements on scientific research," she said.

Lori Faeth, the governor's environmental adviser, said the partnership makes sense.

"The ecosystems are pretty similar," she said.

Formation of the multistate institute was authorized by Congress last year, with it eligible for \$15 million in federal funds. The goal, Napolitano said, is to share knowledge and research as well as develop, promote and monitor forest restoration treatments.

That is likely to involve tree thinning and other cutting.

But the governor said a well-designed -- and scientifically based -- program both reduces the threat of wildfire as well as creates a healthier forest for the remaining trees and the wildlife that lives there.

Faeth said that having more scientific research also helps reduce the political "polarization" that often occurs any time someone suggests forest management programs.

The plan does not replace the Ecological Restoration Institute that already exists at NAU.

"Collaborations with other states and universities who also are at the forefront of forest research will help ensure ecologically healthy communities for future generations," NAU President John Haeger said in a prepared statement.