

## Spotlight shines on NAU forestry expert

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Jake Bacon/Arizona Daily Sun File Photo Dr. Wallace Covington stands in a thicket of ponderosa and piñon pines at Northern Arizona University.

Since the Rodeo-Chediski fire ravaged nearly a half-million acres in eastern Arizona, Wallace Covington, director of Northern Arizona University's Ecological Restoration Institute, has been busy preaching the gospel of forest health from the halls of Congress to the national media.

That was Covington quoted in East Coast newspapers from The Boston Globe to The New York Times and appearing on cable network programs calmly laying out a prescription for wildfire-prone forests

across the West that includes controlled burning and thinning. There was Covington briefing Arizona Republican Sens. Jon Kyl and John McCain and representing Gov. Jane Hull before the Western Governors' Association.

That was Covington in Washington warning the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee that a decade of wildfires costing \$10 billion annually lie ahead unless Congress funds science-based restoration treatments.

And today it's Covington as chairman of the Governor's Forest Health/Fire Plan Advisory Committee releasing recommendations to reduce wildfire risk and restoring forest ecosystems in Arizona.

"What we recommend is spending over a billion dollars on Arizona's forest over a 10-year period," said Covington, adding that a majority of the problem in Arizona is on federal land and that priority must be given to thinning projects around at-risk communities such as Flagstaff.

Forests away from urban areas should also be targeted to provide "a more distant buffer" for communities, he said.

The committee, which included members from the environmental community as well as the logging industry, also told Gov. Jane Hull in their report that: 90 communities, the largest being Flagstaff, are at risk for catastrophic wildfire. More than \$100 million a year must be spent to treat congested, unhealthy forests over the next decade to reduce wildfire threat.

Some 100,000 acres of federal, 3,000 acres of state and private lands and 15,000 acres of tribal lands need to be treated each year. Economic incentives are needed to develop markets and technology to use small-diameter wood cut during restoration projects.

The lengthy report also called for community approaches to the problem and cooperation among all parties involved in the forest health debate to develop consistent guidelines for restoration projects.

Hull is expected to take the report to the Arizona congressional delegation, state officials and legislative leaders for action.

Covington said that the prospects for implementation of at least half of the committee's goals are pretty good over the next decade. He is also optimistic that Congress will increase funding for the National Fire Plan for treatment and prevention.

Wildfires have a way of dissolving political gridlock in Washington, he said.

"I was a little concerned that this was becoming partisan. But this fire season in particular has made it clear to everyone, everywhere that we have to get this done and we don't have a lot of time left," said Covington.

As Regents' Professor of Forest Ecology and a teacher of fire ecology and restoration management at NAU since 1975, Covington's focus has been on science interspersed with trips in the field. The foray into national policy and politics under the media spotlight wasn't his idea.

"I've never wanted to be the 'czar' of restoration of western forest lands," said Covington at his NAU office. He added that the institute's role is to provide information based on rigorous science so communities, land managers and others can make decisions to restore their forests and avoid wildfires.

Covington is best-known for his restoration formula that calls for cutting trees in congested forest to mimic the relatively wide-open forest conditions that existed before settlers arrived. The so-called pre-settlement model has taken flak from some environmental groups who say it harms wildlife and opens the door to commercial logging and the cutting of old growth trees.

Covington said his prescription can be adjusted for forest and wildlife conditions and is not a "one-size-fits-all plan." He said the model is a good one to restore forest health and ecosystems and to reduce fire danger.

"You know, when people came to Arizona in the 1870s and 1880s, it was a glorious forest with big yellow pine and open, park-like stands and healthy watershed and diverse wildlife. Wouldn't that be a good thing for people to inherit 100 years from now? Heck, yes."