



United front needed on Flagstaff forest thinning projects

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You can't tell an old-growth tree by its color after all.

That's seems to be what the Grand Canyon Trust is telling foresters and scientists in its critique of a Forest Service plan to thin thousands of acres of overgrown forest off Woody Mountain Road southwest of Flagstaff.

The Forest Service says that if a large ponderosa has yellow bark, indicating it has become fire resistant, it won't be cut. Otherwise, the plan, which will remove hundreds of thousands of trees, includes cutting about 20,000 fire-prone pines between 16 and 24 inches in diameter. That comes out to about three large pines per acre in an area where there are hundreds of trees per acre.

The Trust, however, has drawn a line in sand: No cutting any tree larger than 16 inches, even those in severely overgrown clusters that are not yet fire-resistant. When asked what is so magical about 16 inches, the Trust says that "science" finds no reason to remove trees any larger.

Come again? The science of forest restoration says just the opposite. Led by NAU professor Wally Covington, experts have found that mature, healthy ponderosa pine forests should have as few as 40 trees per acre. Covington's test plots, which leave a range of tree sizes to avoid an even-age, plantation-style forest, often appear as denuded moonscapes to the lay observer accustomed to dense canopies that block out sunlight.

Covington's prescription, if followed to the letter, would take out many more trees, both large and small, than the public is ready to accept. So the Forest Service has compromised, agreeing to leave all trees that have aged enough to become fire-resistant, regardless of their size.

But apparently that's not good enough for the Trust, which wants size, not fire resistance, to be the determining factor in what gets cut. We challenge the Trust to produce scientific findings that no tree larger than 16 inches should be cut for sake of forest health.

What's worrisome about the Trust's opposition to the Forest Service thinning plan is that it threatens to fray a forest restoration partnership that is a model for the nation. Unlike the Sierra Club and Southwest Forest Alliance, which have never joined the Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership, the Trust has taken a leadership role in the group. That has meant making the necessary compromises with business, government and academic groups to get a series of forest restoration projects on and around the San Francisco Peaks off the ground. The key to the partnership's success has been the united front it has

presented, despite internal differences in crafting the plans, as the projects have moved through the permitting and appeals stages.

But now, in drawing that line in the sand at 16 inches, the Trust is signaling that consensus as a means to a desired end is worth sacrificing in the interest of what appears to be simplistic sloganeering. The implication behind the Trust's charge that the Forest Service is not following science when it approves the thinning of large trees is that such trees are being cut because they make harvesting contracts more lucrative. That may play well in forest activist circles that oppose any thinning as commercial logging, but it's beneath the measured approach to forest restoration that the Trust has taken in the past.

Also worrisome is that the dispute, if it develops into an appeal and possible lawsuit, threatens to disrupt the forest thinning momentum just as the wood products industry is beginning to count on a consistent supply of trees. The announcement that a startup company, Savannah Pacific, is willing take a risk on small-diameter trees by building a sawmill in Bellemont should spur the partnership to develop a set of science-based guidelines for future projects that include tree type, size and cutting volume. Having individual members picking apart each project after the plan is released only undermines what a partnership is intended to be.

Commercial use of small trees is the key toward accelerating the thinning of Flagstaff's overgrown forests. But if sawmills and other users don't have a predictable supply, then taxpayers will have to foot the bill. That means waiting for federal, state and local government grants and other funding while the threat of catastrophic wildfire grows. We've counted on the Trust in the past to show leadership on forest health, and now that includes assuring a wood supply to commercial markets. We don't see that the two are mutually exclusive -- as long as advocacy groups don't draw unnecessary lines in the sand.