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Collaboration aims to save Arizona forests

by Ethan Aumack – Aug. 15, 2010

Three major fires recently roared across northern Arizona, despite the past winter's record snowfalls. Severe flooding, exacerbated by the largest of these fires has already taken a life, and is continuing to threaten homes. These fires and floods are poignant reminders that our ponderosa pine forests are dangerously overgrown and choked with small trees.

Forest Service staff and stakeholders of all stripes – from environmental advocates to industry representatives to scientists and community leaders – have worked diligently to restore forests and prevent the types of fires we have seen recently.

The work accomplished, however, has been small compared to the scale of the problem. Current forest restoration activities are not remotely close to keeping pace with our forests' needs, and we are paying the price. It cost \$10 million to fight the Schultz Fire, and it will take more than \$3 million for rehabilitation. That's enough money to have paid for substantially restoring the area with thinning and controlled burning – preventing the loss of wildlife habitat, and ongoing flood damage.

We can get ahead of the curve. A unique partnership is working to accelerate restoration across northern Arizona's ponderosa pine forests.

In 2009, more than 30 organizations, municipalities, institutions, and agencies united to plan and carry out large, landscape-scale forest restoration projects across 2.4 million acres of the Mogollon Rim.

Known as the Four Forest Restoration Initiative, this effort would cover portions of the Apache-Sitgreaves, Coconino, Kaibab and Tonto national forests.

Over the next 20 years, it calls for thinning predominantly small trees across 1 million acres of ponderosa pine forests, and safely using managed fire to restore natural forest conditions.

The initiative will not only protect northern Arizona's communities and create healthier forests, but also provide jobs. Four factors opened this window of opportunity.

- The initiative has brought diverse stakeholders to the table. With the strong leadership of Forest Supervisors from across northern Arizona, and bipartisan support of local, county, state and federal elected officials, these stakeholders are translating their agreement into action.
- The scale is right, with the first project planned to cover nearly 750,000 acres. This is many times larger than typical restoration projects, and will allow strategic thinning and burning treatments to substantially restore large landscapes across which unnaturally severe, large fires would otherwise burn.

- Strong science underpins the project. Key partners such as Northern Arizona University's Forest Ecosystem Restoration Analysis Project and Ecological Restoration Institute will help ensure that planning proceeds with a strong science backbone.
- The initiative is working with industry to find innovative uses for small trees and the byproducts of restoration-based thinning. Industry involvement will reduce the cost of treatment and create much-needed jobs.

Arizona cannot afford to let our forest health crisis continue. As evidenced by this summer's fires, the costs are simply too high. The Four Forest Restoration Initiative offers our best chance yet of averting future crisis, while simultaneously meeting environmental, economic and social needs.

Win-win-win opportunities such as this are vital for this state. We hope the citizens of Arizona will hold us accountable for translating opportunity into success.

Ethan Aumack is director of restoration programs at the Grand Canyon Trust.