

Activists insist on limited thinning

By GARY GHIOTO

Sun Staff Reporter

04/25/2001



[[view additional photos](#)]



The Grand Canyon Forests Festival has attracted more than researchers, land managers, residents and planners to its second annual celebration of forest restoration efforts in northern Arizona.

Environmental groups, such as the Southwest Forest Alliance, which tried to shut down forest thinning projects such as the one under way in Fort Valley, asked to be included this year in the weeklong series

of workshops and panel discussions.

Their message? No commercial logging or "extreme" thinning programs are needed to reduce fire danger or promote forest health in the region's congested ponderosa pine forests.

The green activist presence at the Festival comes after a bitter round of lawsuits and appeals that delayed restoration logging proposed by the Forest Service and the Grand Canyon Forests Partnership for more than two years.

"It's been good. I think it's going to help not only to make for a better

festival and obviously a more civil atmosphere around Flagstaff because both sides have fanned the flames," said Jake Kreilick, campaign coordinator of the National Forests Protection Alliance, a Montana-based coalition of groups working to eliminate commercial logging in national forests.

"We're just trying to get all these people together ... to talk about the issues of restoration and any commercial logging on public lands," said Roxane George, executive director of Flagstaff Activist Network.

George approached Festival organizers and suggested they allow participation from the "diverse" groups opposed to logging proposed by the Grand Canyon Forests Partnership and their "radical" forest treatments and the use of national forests and restoration projects as commercial enterprises.

During a tour of various forest thinning treatments at Fort Valley Tuesday, George and others led a small group of local residents through the area and made their case against restoration logging under way there. The group also included members of the Partnership and Forest Service officials.

"I just want to understand their point of reference regarding Fort Valley. I need to know what they know because it's my contention that they have a distorted view about what's going on out here at Fort Valley," said John Gerritsma of the Coconino National Forest.

Sharon Galbreath, a veteran Sierra Club activist now executive director of the Southwest Forest Alliance, welcomed the chance to participate in the Festival this year.

"I think people genuinely like to see discourse. I know I do. Personally, as an activist, I like to see all different viewpoints come in and talk about an issue. The reaction has been very positive," Galbreath said.

Panel discussions Sunday featuring activists opposed to what they call "extreme" thinning prescriptions to reduce the number of trees and forest fuels also included proponents of restoration logging, such as Grand Canyon Trust and other Partnership members.

While walking through open spaces of once congested ponderosa pine forests logged to mimic pre-settlement conditions with only a handful of trees per acre, Sam Hitt, founder of Forest Guardians, a New Mexico environmental group, shook his head.

Hitt noticed exotic weeds springing up in cleared areas and questioned the logic of logging congested forests to reduce fire danger as proposed by W. Wallace Covington, director of the Ecological Restoration Institute. Hitt believes much of the restoration logging under way is reacting to "political pressure" brought to bear after a season of disastrous fires across the West.

"I hate the word 'catastrophic'," said Hitt referring to the wildfires, "because it oversimplifies the problem of these large fires.

"Yeah, of course there are areas where all the trees have been killed, but there's a tremendous amount of variation of burn intensity" that was beneficial to forest health, he added.

As far as the Ecological Restoration Institute's presettlement and other treatment conditions, Hitt was pessimistic.

"I think we will look back ... at Wally Covington's presettlement model and say it's a disaster," Hitt said.

Activists intend to closely monitor the Fort Valley thinning work and examine the 9,000-acre restoration project being proposed now in Kachina Village.

Hitt said environmental groups backed off Fort Valley after the plan was appealed several times and one lawsuit was filed, sensing it was a done deal. But that doesn't mean activists are rolling over for restoration logging, he said.

"Well, we might go back to court. We have the option to go to court any time. We also have the option to challenge future projects like the Kachina project. So we're going to keep those options open," Hitt said.

"We're going to hold their feet to the fire as far as monitoring goes," Hitt said of Fort Valley, "If they back away from scientific management they will lose credibility. They already have backed away from a 16-inch cutting cap."

Kreilick's coalition opposes the sale of timber from restoration logging to help pay for the project. He said federal funds should be used to conduct limited clearing of trees and the timber should be provided to nonprofit groups and residents for a reduced fee. Proposals such as one under way to use small-diameter logs from the forest to build traditional hogans in Cameron is laudable, but it should not be a for-profit venture, he added.

Kreilick said millions of federal dollars now being funneled into the Coconino, Kaibab and other Arizona national forests to thin forests and fight wildfires should be going to property owners to reduce fire danger on their lands by thinning and reducing forest fuels.

The Festival continues this week at locations around Flagstaff. A program of events is available. For more information about Forest Festival events, call the Ecological Restoration Institute at 523-9011 or check out their Web site at www.eri.nau.edu.

Gary Ghioto can be reached at gghioto@azdailysun.com or 556-2251.

Additional photos for this story:

