

# Forest thinning proposed near Mountaineire

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Coconino National Forest plans to thin 16,569 acres of forest south of Mountaineire to reduce the threat of uncontrollable fires.

Money for thinning has yet to be allocated and any work could be at least two years away, but an open house will be held in two weeks for anyone wanting to comment.

Hundreds of thousands to millions of ponderosa pines would be thinned in the Mormon Lake Ranger District, where the Forest Service has rated fire danger at high to extreme on more than half the land.

Oaks, pines that have yellowed with age and trees wider than 24 inches in diameter wouldn't be cut under the plan.

About 1,700 nearby residents will receive a mailing on the proposed plan, said Alvin Brown, Coconino National Forest environmental coordinator for the region. An environmental assessment has yet to be released.

The Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership, a fuels-reduction coalition that includes cattle ranchers, environmentalists and forestry experts, helped to develop the plan as part of a decade-long forest restoration program for 100,000 acres in and around the San Francisco Peaks.

Other environmental groups had yet to weigh in last week.

Most of the trees in the area range from 5 to 18 inches in diameter, with 15 percent of the trees larger in diameter than 18 inches.

To provide diversity in age and size, trees of nearly every size will be cut, with trees a foot to 18 inches in diameter targeted most heavily.

Yet the goal of the project, according to the Forest Service's plan, is to leave big old trees --which they defined as 16 inches in diameter and larger --standing.

At least one person said the plan didn't go far enough toward bringing forests back to the way they grew before decades of fire suppression.

"There's about 20 times as many trees present in the current stands as were present in the pre-settlement forest," said Wally Covington, Regents' professor and director of Northern Arizona University's Ecological Restoration Institute.

Cutting 90 percent to 95 percent of the trees in some areas may be necessary to get open spaces, wildflowers, add biodiversity and accomplish the Forest Service's goal of reducing the likelihood of fires, Covington said.

But habitat for goshawks and other species were also factored in, Kim Newbauer of the Peaks and Mormon Lake ranger districts said, and was a key consideration in deciding how much was cut.

Any potential appeals on this project would follow slightly different rules than other projects, Brown said.

Individuals would have 30 days to object, instead of 45, and would have to comment now as opposed to waiting until a decision on thinning is made.

A separate but related part of this plan involves building 3.5 miles of loop trails near Mountaineer, relying on volunteers such as bicycling groups. The trails would be open to bikers, hikers and horses.

An open house on proposed trails and thinning will be held in Kachina Village on April 13 from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. in the Highlands Fire District Station 21 at 568 Kona Trail. Copies of the proposed thinning and trails will be available there, or can be viewed online at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/coconino/nepa/index.shtml>.

Call Mormon Lake Ranger District at 774-1147 for more information.

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