



Governor to unveil forest health plans in Flagstaff

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During her second visit to Flagstaff next week in less than a month, Gov. Janet Napolitano will unveil a series of recommendations to address the crumbling health of Arizona's forests and the continuing threat of wildfire.

Napolitano will host a meeting Monday at the Pine Canyon Country Club, where she will share proposed directives generated primarily from the Arizona Forest Health Oversight Council, a group of scientists, advocates and government officials appointed by the governor.

The Forest Health Advisory Council, a second committee of appointees, adds to the recommendations with its "Guiding Principles of Forest Health," which create the framework for forest restoration projects.

Although the final version of the recommendations is not available, Oversight Council co-chair Diane Vosick said the suggested actions will address how forest health should be handled at the state and federal level.

They also look to the private citizens.

"One of our recommendations is to encourage people to create a defensible space," said Vosick, who is the associate director at Northern Arizona University's Ecological Restoration Institute. "People need to make some changes in the way they have their landscaping and what's touching their homes and what their homes are built with."

Still, the Oversight Council recognizes that the major catastrophic fires of recent years have occurred on federal land, and that money and directives must come from Washington.

Of the 944,000 acres that have burned in Arizona since 2000, nearly 828,000 acres were on federal lands.

"Significant responsibilities for the solutions to the forest health and wildfire problems are rooted in the actions of the federal land management agencies," Vosick wrote in the foreword of the drafted recommendations, co-authored by Rep. Tom O'Halloran, R-Sedona. "We urge the federal government to apply the same level of urgency and effectiveness to forest management that exemplifies their incident command approach to fighting fire."

The recommendations come after seven months of meetings by both councils, which are working to provide the research and framework for the governor's "Forest Health and Safety Action Plan." It comes in the wake of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act passed by Congress late last year.

Vosick is joined by a number of other Flagstaff-based representatives on the two councils. Flagstaff Mayor Joe Donaldson also serves on the oversight council. ERI director Wally Covington and Coconino County Supervisor Deb Hill both serve on the advisory council, which is co-chaired by Taylor McKinnon of the Flagstaff-based Grand Canyon Trust.

Although Napolitano's schedule in Flagstaff was still tentative as of Thursday afternoon, staff member Pati Urias said the governor would spend about four hours here on Monday, starting at 1:10 p.m. with the forest health announcement.

She planned to tour a mural project at Coconino High School at 2:15 p.m. and then meet with members of the local Italian American Club to receive an honorary membership.

The governor also will visit the Federated Community Church on Aspen Street for a 3:15 p.m. meeting with local children's advocates, namely the Coconino Coalition for Children & Youth.

Napolitano visited Flagstaff less than a month ago on Jan. 13, the day after delivering her annual address to the Legislature, to speak about her initiatives laid out in her speech. Her prime focus has been on early education, which led her to South Beaver Elementary School to read to first graders and talk to educators.

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