

NAU gets new limb to stand on for forest restoration research

By GARY GHIOTO
Sun Staff Reporter

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Later this year, the Ecological Restoration Institute will be up and running and focusing on "reversing the ecological, economic and social degradation of the nation's wildlands."

The Arizona Board of Regents established the institute last month at Northern Arizona University. Funding of the unique research program is expected to come from public and private sources.

The region's vast but declining ponderosa pine forest and fragile canyon, desert and river ecosystems will provide a practical laboratory for the fledgling institution.

The restoration of congested and unhealthy forests in the Flagstaff area is currently in the planning stages by the Grand Canyon Forest Partnership, NAU and the U.S. Forest Service.

"The ponderosa pine forests of the Southwest and similar ecosystems worldwide are suffering. They are becoming increasingly vulnerable to disease, insect infestation and intense wildfires," said W. Wallace Covington, NAU's Ecological Restoration Institute director.

"The new institute will supply more than science to the restoration equation. It will bring together interested undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and staff from a wide variety of disciplines and professions to advance the science, theory and practice of ecological restoration and ultimately to retain lost ground," Covington added.

The institute is designed to take an interdisciplinary approach to identify and apply ecologically based solutions to complex forest problems to "achieve the goal of sustainable ecosystems, Covington said.

NAU President Clara M. Lovett praised the Board of Regents for recognizing the "urgent need for restoration action."

"This action will enable researchers to address economic concerns, wildlife needs, biological processes and human interaction related to ecological restoration, under one roof," Lovett said.

The institute's mission has drawn support from U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and U.S. Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz.

"The establishment of this institute will help keep NAU on the cutting edge of this field and ensure that forest managers in Arizona have access to the best available forest restoration techniques," said Kyl.

The institute will be organizing a national conference on ponderosa pine restoration April 25-27 at NAU.

Key speakers will include Babbitt, Michael Soule of the Society for Conservation Biology, and Reed Noss, president and chief scientist for Conservation Science Inc.