

Logging pact for northern Arizona reached

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Two environmental groups and a logging company have reached a historic pact that could lead to the harvesting of nearly a million acres of small trees in northern Arizona.

The pact should help Arizona Forest Restoration Products get the eventual go-ahead from the U.S. Forest Service for its request to do logging in the Mogollon Rim area. The trees harvested would be converted into "oriented strand board," a type of wafer board.

But the two environmental groups also see this as a victory because it will both preserve large diameter trees while doing what they believe is an ecologically acceptable amount of thinning.

And tied up in that is the belief that, without some commercial operations and the income they produce, there is not enough taxpayer money to restore the more than three million acres of forests in the area to health.

Pascal Berlioux, president and chief executive officer of AFRP, said work on this agreement has been going on for more than a year. But Taylor McKinnon, public lands program director at the Center for Biological Diversity, said this really is the culmination of 15 years of negotiations "to move beyond controversy and get on with the hard work of restoring these once-majestic forests."

The accord is significant because it could be the first time that the industry

and Arizona environmental groups are presenting a united front in favor of a specific logging plan. Many prior efforts by companies and the Forest Service to permit logging have ended in litigation.

Ethan Aumack, director of restoration programs for the Grand Canyon Trust, called this deal "unprecedented."

Most immediately, the pact means a united front as the Forest Service seeks proposals later this year for thinning.

Berlioux said there is no guarantee his company, which has plans in place for a processing plant in Winslow, will get that contract. But he said this agreement, coupled with state and local support, should give AFRP a leg up.

But the longer-term implications could mean 600 jobs, \$200 million annually into the regional economy, a healthier forest and fewer catastrophic fires.

The idea is to thin out the thick growth of young trees that flourished after logging took out many of the old-growth trees and grazing as well as fire suppression supported the growth of thick stands of smaller trees. That changes the ecosystem - including the animals able to live there - and threatens the remaining large trees, including the increased risk of fire.

This plan would harvest about 300,000 acres of young trees around communities throughout the Mogollon Rim. Another more than 600,000 acres would be thinned in more remote wildlands areas.

Ultimately, the goal is to have the

forests back to the condition where nature - including naturally occurring fires and prescribed burns - can keep the forest healthy without endangering large swaths.

"For the longest time, there has been this doubt in anybody's mind that the enviros and the industry could ever work together," Berlioux said.

Aumack said economic reality forced both sides to work together.

"We need to do much more work on the ground than we've done before," he said.

"Based on the size of fires we've seen recently, we know we need to be working at much larger scales, up to 50,000 acres a year, across the Mogollon Rim," Aumack explained. And he said the price for treatment, planning and preparation, can approach \$1,000 per acre.

"Basic math suggests that if we proceed with the current model, we have a cost-prohibitive need in front of us," he said. And the only way to offset those costs is through commercial logging.

The bonus, Aumack said, are sustainable jobs in rural communities.

Navajo County Supervisor David Tenney said his county strongly supports what he called a "landmark agreement."

Tenney said his county has a strong interest in forest health, what with the effects of the 2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire that destroyed more than 460,000 acres.