

A R I Z O N A Daily Sun

A Pulitzer Newspaper Serving

Flagstaff and northern Arizona since 1887

Old adversaries sign forest pact

By DAILY SUN STAFF

Thursday, February 24, 2011

On paper, they are all starting on the same page.

Now comes the hard part: finding the money and implementing one of the most ambitious forest restoration plans in the country.

More than 20 organizations -- some of them past legal adversaries -- signed a memorandum of understanding Wednesday in Flagstaff with the U.S. Forest Service for the restoration of 1.5 million acres across four forests: Coconino, Kaibab, Apache-Sitgreaves and Tonto.

The sheer size of the project had signatories grasping for superlatives.

"At hundreds of thousands of acres, you can just about manage for every kind of wildlife except grizzly bears," said Wally Covington, executive director of NAU's Ecological Restoration Institute. "This gives you the scale to protect watersheds, create wildlife habitat and attract viable businesses that can use the excess trees, provide jobs and stimulate local economies."

The Coconino and Kaibab forests, the first in line to be treated, had a 750,000-acre action plan released last month. The public comment period continues through March 11.

A decade ago, Flagstaff-area forest officials, scientists, business groups and conservationists launched a plan to thin and restore 100,000 acres that is ongoing.

But public funding has been scarce, and the wood-products industry has said the scale of the harvesting is too small -- a 20-year guaranteed wood supply is needed to justify private investment in a strandboard plant, which would pay for the thinning and other treatments.

The so-called Four Forests Restoration Initiative addresses that concern by prescribing thinning and controlled burns across the entire ponderosa pine forest. That had Pascal Berlioux, president and CEO of Arizona Forest Restoration Products Inc., anxious to get started Wednesday.

"Collaboration does not accomplish enough if it does not translate into action," Berlioux said. "It is now time to cross that last

bridge and complete the planning and contracting processes that will allow appropriate-scale industry to build a small-diameter tree utilization infrastructure capable of offsetting treatment costs and funding landscape-scale restoration in northern Arizona."

Some of the conservation groups that signed the agreement Wednesday have tangled in the past with the Forest Service and even each other over standards for protecting wildlife habitat and sustainable harvesting. But they appeared to have called a truce Wednesday.

"Today marks a turning point for northern Arizona's forests and the communities and species that call them home," said Todd Schulke, forest policy analyst at the Center for Biological Diversity. "After a century of ecosystem decline, the long-overdue restoration envisioned by the Four Forest Restoration Initiative will set forested landscapes on a path of recovery. We're excited to be part of that endeavor."

Among other signatories were the Northern Arizona Loggers Association, the Grand Canyon Trust, and the Nature Conservancy of Arizona.