

Four Forest Restoration Initiative

A Collaborative Effort to Restore Forest Ecosystems on Four National Forests in Arizona

<http://www.4fri.org>



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Large-Scale Forest Restoration Effort Seeks Industry Partners

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. – This past Wednesday, the U.S. Forest Service released a Request for Proposals (RFP) for implementing large-scale forest restoration across 300,000 acres of northern Arizona’s national forests using a 10-year stewardship contract. Once awarded later this fall, the contract will begin the first phase of the Four Forest Restoration Initiative – a 20-year plan by the Forest Service and over 40 organizations to restore ponderosa pine forests across northern Arizona’s national forests. With the Wallow Fire still burning in eastern Arizona, the need to quickly implement these large-scale restoration efforts could not be more pronounced.

Restoration-based industry involvement is vital to the success of the 4FRI. Costs for reducing the risk of severe wildfire and preparing the landscape to receive low-intensity fire through the mechanical thinning of small-diameter trees often exceed \$1000 per acre. With ever-decreasing federal budgets, however, these costs have proven to be a significant impediment to successful implementation of forest restoration projects in the area. The 4FRI and the RFP address this hurdle by engaging appropriately scaled, community-based industries capable of utilizing restoration byproducts to offset forest restoration treatment costs.

The 4FRI hopes to demonstrate that ecologically appropriate forest restoration projects can also be economically sustainable. “This initiative will create healthy forests, which are vital to the healthy economies of rural Arizona,” says Sue Sitko, The Nature Conservancy’s northern Arizona Conservation Manager. “Communities, people’s homes, and livelihoods will be safer from large, uncharacteristic wildfires. Concurrently, tree thinning and wood utilization will support the local timber industry, creating jobs and pumping money back into the local economy.”

In addition to reducing wildfire danger and boosting local economies, the forest restoration activities performed by industry under the 4FRI contracts are also expected to help protect and enhance ecologically important wildlife habitats. “Efforts that bring free enterprise and wood harvesting to the aid of forest restoration shatter ‘species vs. industry’ paradigms,” says Shaula Hedwall, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Senior Fish and Wildlife Biologist. “Eliciting thoughtful and profitable wood harvesting to assist in restoring habitat will play a role in recovering the threatened Mexican spotted owl and endangered fishes in our watersheds. Unhealthy forest conditions beget stand-replacing fires; well-planned commercial harvest can reduce fuel loads and improve forest resiliency, which protects communities and benefits sensitive fish and wildlife.”

The key to achieving the 4FRI’s ecological goals, say supporters, is to involve industries able to utilize the small-diameter trees that scientists agree must be removed to create a healthy forest. “Decades of scientific research reveal that the Southwest’s frequent-fire ecosystems are suffocating under too many trees. Where we once had 12

to 25 trees per acre, we now have hundreds,” says Northern Arizona University’s Ecological Restoration Institute Executive Director Dr. Wally Covington. “As a result of this unnatural forest structure, the forest cannot self-regulate, ecological processes are out of balance, and the heavy fuel load from too many trees results in catastrophic wildfire.”

Historically, the costs of removing small-diameter trees, which traditionally held little value, limited the scope of northern Arizona forest restoration efforts. “Over 20 years of forest restoration projects have shown that we cannot afford to restore our forests at meaningful scales without engaging industry partners that can fully utilize restoration byproducts in the form of small-diameter trees,” says Grand Canyon Trust’s Director of Restoration Programs Ethan Aumack.

Spanning Arizona, the 4FRI is likely to spur industry development in northern Arizona and support existing industry in eastern Arizona. Similar to the 2004 White Mountain Stewardship Contract, which helped jumpstart the development of Future Forest, LLC – a wood products company located in Pinetop, AZ that is charged with managing the reduction of tree densities across 150,000 acres of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest – Wednesday’s RFP is likely to result in a contract that will create new restoration-based industry in the Flagstaff or Winslow area. Future Forest Partner Rob Davis is excited that the Forest Service issued the RFP and hopes that it will attract more viable businesses that can economically perform forest restoration across Arizona. “We’ve worked on the 4FRI, which we regard as the successor to the White Mountain Stewardship Contract, all in an effort to transition the WMSC’s accomplishments to the larger landscape, and to develop a mix of small to large, appropriately sized businesses that can serve as a sustainable solution for northern Arizona communities and forests.”

The Forest Service is likely to receive RFP responses from numerous entrepreneurs hoping to apply sustainable economic solutions to northern Arizona’s forest restoration needs. One such company that hopes to create an economic engine capable of funding landscape-scale restoration is Arizona Forest Restoration Products, Inc. “We applaud the Forest Service for taking this significant step,” said AZFRP President and CEO Pascal Berlioux. “We believe that landscape-scale restoration must be ecologically sound and collaboratively supported, and that it can also be economically viable, job-creating, and beneficial to rural communities and economies. The contract awarding process over the next several months will be a very important time to determine how these elements of restoration merge together. We look forward to this process.”

The economic and environmental benefits promised by the 4FRI have also garnered support from county supervisors throughout northern Arizona, many of whom have been critical to the development of the initiative. Representing communities that have suffered from large-scale wildfires, county supervisors like Navajo County’s David Tenney have been among the earliest and most vocal supporters of the 4FRI. “For Navajo County, the 4FRI is about much more than just forest restoration,” Tenney declared. “If implemented properly, the 4FRI would fundamentally change the economic and environmental future of the County. Instead of fearing another landscape-scale fire like the Wallow or 2002’s Rodeo-Chediski, Navajo County residents would benefit from a revitalized wood-products industry that would protect communities from the threat of wildfire and potentially generate hundreds of jobs.”

Gila County Supervisor Tommie Martin agreed. “You can let the forest earn – by creating jobs – or let it burn at unnaturally severe levels,” Martin said. “For Gila County, the choice is an easy one. Through 4FRI, we can let it earn and restore the ecosystem to a more natural, sustainable, fire-adapted condition.”

The Forest Service will be accepting responses to the RFP until August 12, 2011 and hopes to award the stewardship contract later this fall.