

Stakeholders use science to find common ground on wood supply from forests

Northern Arizona University has released a report that identifies the potential volume of wood resources available from more than 2 million acres of Arizona forests, representing the first major agreement among groups typically at odds over the issue of forest thinning.

The “Wood Supply Analysis” report identifies a potential supply of up to 850 million cubic feet of wood and 8 million tons of biomass from branches and timber residue for such commercial uses as pallets, firewood, poles, lumber, mulch and stove pellets.

A group of 20 stakeholders representing forest wood-product businesses, local government, environmental groups and public land and resource management agencies worked with scientists from NAU to build agreement about the amount and type of wood supply that could be available from the thinning of Arizona’s ponderosa pine forests to promote ecosystem health and reduce the risk of unnaturally severe wildfire.

“Even the best science and the best of intentions are of limited value if they cannot inform decisions and appropriate action,” said NAU professor Tom Sisk, founder of NAU’s Forest Ecosystem Restoration Analysis Project, which led the effort. “I think we have turned a corner, where everybody wants to see on-the-ground progress in forest stewardship.”

The stakeholder group included representatives from the USDA Forest Service, Center for Biological Diversity, Grand Canyon Trust, NAU’s Ecological Restoration Institute, Forest Energy/Future Forests, the Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership and others.

The group evaluated 2.4 million acres of ponderosa pine forest stretching from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, across the Mogollon Plateau, to the New Mexico state line. The area primarily encompasses the Coconino, Kaibab and Apache-Sitgreaves national forests, a small portion of the Tonto National Forest and some private and state lands.

The group agreed that the identified wood and biomass resources were available from 41 percent of the area studied. They also agreed that 26 percent of the area was not appropriate for thinning for commercial wood byproducts. Some participants felt that an additional 33 percent of the landscape might be an appropriate source of additional wood byproducts. But because of differing views about thinning versus controlled-burning restoration treatments, and uncertainty about other factors such as road access and archaeological sites, Sisk said, the group remained divided about thinning these lands, which would have increased estimated wood supply by only 16 percent.

“This project is unique at the national level, and the fact that consensus was reached on almost 70 percent of the landscape is remarkable,” said Todd Schulke, forest programs director of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Steve Gatewood, representing the Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership, said appropriately scaled wood products businesses will play a key role in restoring forests. “However, stakeholders want assurance that ‘appropriate’ is defined by restoration needs, not industry profit motives, and businesses want guarantees of future wood supplies to invest in equipment designed to harvest and process small-diameter wood—a much harder business to make viable than when harvesting larger diameter trees was the norm,” said Gatewood.

Rob Davis, president of Forest Energy and owner of Future Forests, two companies using material from

thinned forests, noted that although the products derived from forests have changed in recent years, forests remain a valuable renewable resource for recreation, wildlife, water and wood products. “This milestone consensus is a breakthrough in achieving the most prudent use of this resource.”

The ForestERA Project estimates of potential wood supply were derived from satellite imagery and ground measurements and are based on treatment scenarios developed by the group. The process included seven full-day workshops in northern Arizona that were open to the public.

“It’s challenging to lead a contentious debate about important social issues while remaining true to the underlying science, but this group stepped up to the challenge, and I think they have articulated a sensible approach that will benefit the forest and those who care about and depend on it,” said Haydee Hampton, NAU research associate and leader of the wood supply project.

Hampton said the Southwestern Region of the USDA Forest Service funded the study to inform local-level discussions of future thinning projects that will include National Environmental Policy Act analyses and to foster the development of contracts to wood product businesses to accomplish forest restoration.

Source: Northern Arizona University

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