

Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project



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The Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project A Good Investment in Our Future?

Would you invest \$100 to save a \$1,000 or more? That's essentially the question Flagstaff voters faced in the 2012 General Election with Proposition 405. The proposed *Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project* (FWPP), was an ambitious ask of city voters for \$10 million to undertake forest treatments on city, state, and federal lands in-and-around our community to prevent catastrophic wildfire and resulting post-fire flooding.

The measure passed with 74% approval, a testament to the community's understanding of the issue and their interest to see the threat diminished. FWPP was rightly seen by voters as an investment in our future – our forests, our water, our homes and businesses, and the very fabric of our community itself: the reasons we call Flagstaff home.

The \$10 million investment approved by Flagstaff voters in 2012 was a statement of national significance. Never before in our country has a community stepped-up in this manner to fund work, much of it on national forest lands outside the City. An additional \$7 million has been contributed by others since 2012, further validation of the project's importance.

In the six years since FWPP was approved and work begun, we've faced many challenges and have made great progress. The funding provided in 2012 was a good-faith down-payment on the work required. Those funds have allowed us to undertake and continue efforts in the Dry Lake Hills area, the largest and most difficult area, and we anticipate we will be able to complete that work within the next two years or so.

However, as we move toward in the near future initiating work on the Mormon Mountain area south of town, the final piece of FWPP, additional funding will be required. Mormon Mountain is critical to our community and the greater Flagstaff area as the watershed, and Lake Mary, serves as a vital water supply for the region.

When the time comes, how much more are we willing to invest to protect our quality of life and sense of community?

We recognized the eventual need for additional funding in 2012, and began talking about that need in earnest last year, as planned prior to the election. We are at work to secure needed funding, to include working with Coconino County to secure County Flood Control District appropriations.

Destructive wildfire, and the almost certain flooding that follows, is the greatest natural threat we face. It's an annual occurrence, and it's growing worse across the west. Fire is relentless, and the impacts of bad fire are staggering. Consider:

- The 2003, following the devastating Rodeo-Chediski fire in eastern AZ, our State's first true mega-fire, the City undertook an informal study to assess the potential impact to our community should a similar fire occur in our area. The effort revealed that White Mtn communities suffered an overall 8% decline of tourism revenue in the first year following the fire. For Flagstaff, that would have equated to roughly a \$60M first-year decline.
- The 2013, the NAU Rural Policy Institute completed the *Schultz Fire Full Cost Accounting Report* which found that while the 2010 Schultz Fire cost \$10 million to suppress, there was actually an estimated \$135 million spent on recovery efforts in the first two years after the fire. Of importance here, this fire, immediately adjacent to Flagstaff, was in a rural residential area, damaged relatively little infrastructure, and affected virtually no commercial interests.
- Shortly thereafter, the City and the NAU Ecological Restoration Institute commissioned the same group to undertake the *FWPP Cost Avoidance Study*, an attempt to estimate the impacts to Flagstaff if a Schultz fire type wildfire burned within the Project area. The estimated cost? Between \$550 million and \$1.2 billion.
- In early 2014, the Slide fire burned in the upper reaches of Oak Creek, south of Flagstaff and 10 miles north of Sedona. The fire itself never threatened Sedona, nor did the feared flash flooding occur in the following months. But that fall, the Sedona Chamber reported a \$100 million loss of revenue to the community, all in the three months between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Why? All during May, at the time folks were planning vacations, Sedona was in the national media spotlight – the famed Red Rock area was on fire! Who wants to go on vacation to a burned-out community to see a smoking black forest?

Wildfire is a very real threat, and that threat doesn't end when the flames are extinguished. It's important to recognize the huge impact large and severe fires can have on our community. In many respects, the problems are only just beginning when the firefighters go home.

With a little investment, we can significantly reduce the threat. For a \$100, we really can protect \$1,000, and a lot more.

For more information on the Project, visit www.flagstaffwatershedprotection.org