

Flagstaff takes proactive step vs. wildfires

Flagstaff voters overwhelmingly approved in November a bond question for the Forest Health and Water Supply Protection Project. Not your typical municipal bond, this initiative authorizes Flagstaff to issue \$10 million in bonds to support restoration projects on U.S. Forest Service and state lands just outside Flagstaff city limits.

That's right. Flagstaff voters are willing to incur debt to thin forests outside their city.

Specifically, the bonds will help pay for forest treatments in two critical Flagstaff watersheds.

A wildfire in these watersheds could significantly damage the city's primary surface-water reservoir and send significant flooding and debris flows through historic downtown Flagstaff, Northern Arizona University's campus and other residential neighborhoods.

As our global climate warms, we will continue to experience extreme weather events, including catastrophic wildfires. Even Arizona's landscape-scale Four Forest Restoration Initiative, designed to restore 2.4 million forested acres over 20 years, can't accomplish the restoration fast enough. Rather than face the uncertainty associated with federal appropriations, municipal bonding provides an immediate lump-sum investment that can significantly expedite these much-needed forest treatments.

OUR TURN



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Flagstaff is by no means the first community to recognize the value of investing in treating surrounding watersheds on federal lands to reduce the fuel load.

Santa Fe's Municipal Watershed Plan, which is partially funded through a monthly fee on water utility bills for "ecosystem services," is a frequently cited example. However, Flagstaff is the first municipality in the nation to pass a voter-approved bond measure to establish and fund such an arrangement.

Flagstaff and the U.S. Forest Service are now developing the details of this partnership. The project's success and the likelihood that other communities will adopt this approach is likely to largely depend on how the program is structured.

To be effective and maintain community support, it's essential that the municipality and the agency administer the project in a transparent, responsible way that that inspires public confidence — an important objective, but not necessarily an easy one to accomplish.



Crews fight the 2010 Schultz Fire near Flagstaff, which passed a municipal bond last year to raise \$10 million to fund forest-thinning efforts that should help protect the city. DAVID KADLUBOWSKI/REPUBLIC FILE PHOTO

Every spring, communities across the West brace for fire season, hoping they escape the ravages of wildfire and subsequent flooding.

We commend the voters of Flagstaff, the City Council and staff, and the U.S. Forest Service for looking for new ways to solve a persistent widespread challenge.

By seeking local support for a creative approach to solve the

problem, Flagstaff has taken a proactive step that other municipalities in the West can also take to protect water, property and lives.

We believe that cross-jurisdictional cooperation and creative collaborative strategies, like Flagstaff's bond question, are critical to reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire and flooding in Western cities and towns. Communities can either

pay now to reduce the wildfire risk or pay later to extinguish the fires and clean up.

We're glad the forward-looking voters of Flagstaff have chosen the former and hope that other communities will consider following suit.

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