



# Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project Report July-Dec. 2014



## **Background**

In the November 2012 election, City voters overwhelmingly approved (74%) a \$10 million dollar bond to fund the Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project (FWPP). This forest treatment effort, involving City, State, and Federal lands, is designed to reduce the risk of severe wildfire and subsequent post-fire flooding in the Rio de Flag (Dry Lake Hills) and Upper Lake Mary (Mormon Mountain) watersheds. This report highlights significant accomplishments from July-December 2014.

## **Project Planning**

The US Forest Service (USFS) developed four treatment alternatives, which were analyzed and compared in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The DEIS was released for public comment in early July. Two open houses were held at the Flagstaff Aquaplex to provide an opportunity for the public to review and ask questions about the DEIS; we also hosted an open house and project update meeting for the Mormon Lake community. The 45-day public comment period ended on August 18<sup>th</sup>. The comments will be used by the USFS to develop the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and draft Record of Decision (ROD), expected late spring of 2015. Once published, there will be a 45-day objection period for those who provided comments followed by a 45-day resolution period. The final ROD, which will contain the final decision for treatment, is expected fall 2015.

Some of the harvesting methods analyzed in the alternatives included the use of cable logging and helicopter logging, both atypical for northern Arizona. To more fully understand the potential of utilizing cable logging, we visited past sites with local experts in both the White Mountains and in southern Arizona. Similarly, to better understand the potential use of both steep-terrain ground-based equipment and helicopters, two out-of-state operational experts visited the project area. Although implementation methods that will be used have not been decided, these site visits confirmed these types of harvesting methods can be effectively implemented in the project area.

## **Implementation**

City and USFS crews have been busy doing treatment work in the Dry Lake Hills project area, which involves hand thinning, pile burning of slash, broadcast burning, and noxious weed treatments. Implementation of treatments in the Dry Lake Hills is a priority and is expected to be in full swing once the Final ROD is approved. For previously approved projects on federal lands, a total of 135 acres of hand thinning, 200 acres of prescribed burning, and 125 acres of noxious weed treatments have been completed. City crews treated 185 acres in the Rio de Flag watershed and another 80 acres on Observatory Mesa. On Brookbank Meadow, a parcel owned by the Navajo Nation, City crews removed encroaching small ponderosa pines (35 acres) to achieve meadow restoration. To enable future work within the Dry Lake Hills area to proceed, re-surfacing portions of the Schultz Pass Road was completed and similar work on the Mt. Elden Lookout Road will begin in the spring of 2015, when conditions allow. On State Trust land, the project's first mechanical thinning was completed on 400 acres in Equestrian Estates. To-date, over 1,200 acres have been treated across the FWPP project area. We expect the pace of annual accomplishment to increase beginning next year following the Final ROD.



## **Outreach**

Outreach continued at a vigorous pace, including public meetings, community events, field visits, installation of an informational trail kiosk at Brookbank Meadow, production of various publications, displays, presentations at local and regional events, and updating the project's website and Flickr account. We also hosted several events for the annual Festival of Science, which included Science and Engineering Day, a brown bag lunch presentation and a hike into the Dry Lake Hills' project area. FWPP hosted Northern Arizona University's (NAU) Ecological Restoration class on a site visit to Dry Lake Hills so students could learn first-hand about the effort and team members also visited classes on NAU's campus. The project has been highlighted in several local and state media stories, including several features by KNAU Arizona Public Radio.

## **Monitoring**

A City Monitoring Plan has been finalized and is posted on the FWPP website. The plan contains four capacity monitoring frameworks: 1) Fire Behavior, 2) Hydrologic Response, 3) Socioeconomic, and 4) Other Ongoing/Potential Monitoring Projects. The City Monitoring Plan, which is independent of the environmental planning process underway for treatment on the National Forest, is designed to address voters' questions, provide project transparency, and identify potential partners and external funding sources. As these projects are implemented and tracked, the monitoring plan will be updated and related reports will be posted on the website.

One early result of the monitoring effort is the "FWPP Cost Avoidance Study" by NAU's Rural Policy Institute. Released in October, this report estimated the economic impact an uncharacteristic stand replacing wildfire and subsequent flooding would have in the FWPP project areas. The conservatively estimated impact and projected cost savings ranged from \$573 million to \$1.2 billion in damages, making the case that the City's \$10 million bond is a sound investment.

## **Tribal Engagement**

Tribes in northern Arizona, including the Hopi Tribe, have been consulted as part of the USFS planning process. Project managers have been working closely with the Navajo Nation to examine opportunities for treatments in Brookbank Meadow, a 140-acre in-holding located within the Dry Lake Hills. This resulted in a mutual decision to extend FWPP treatments into Brookbank Meadow. The meadow restoration and construction of the informational kiosk described above signify the first phase of this partnership effort.



## **Financial Investment and Leveraged Funds**

To date, through either cash contributions or in-kind services, various partners have provided slightly over \$2 million to FWPP; this is in addition to the City's \$10 million commitment. Since the bond passed, the project's financial portfolio has grown by 20%. The bulk of this additional investment has come from the USFS, but over 10 other partners have also contributed to the project, demonstrating the widespread support the project has received. Two grant awards from Arizona State Forestry, totaling \$200,000, were received to offset costs to treat Observatory Mesa. We've also joined the Salt River Project and others throughout Arizona to collaborate and develop new funding approaches for forest restoration within our State.

## **Summary**

We continue to make great progress in our quest to reduce the threat of severe fire, protect two critical watersheds, and enhance community well being. In the beginning of this year, we identified key goals and we are pleased to report we were able to fully accomplish the majority of these. Additionally, we look forward to the Final EIS and Record of Decision. This will mark a milestone of intense planning for the project with the goal of full-scale implementation expected next fall. We thank you for your support and we are devoted to the success of this innovative project for the betterment of our community.