

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

May 30, 2007

OPINIONS & LETTERS TO THE EDITOR online print edition



May. 29, 2007 12:00 AM

Summer's coming, and we can almost smell the smoke. More and more, the season of swimming and school vacation also means wildfires.

Sometimes we get a brief break, like last year. But overall, the scale and intensity of Arizona wildfires is increasing at a frightening pace.

Our forests are sick.

We've known for a long time that the old policy of fire suppression, snuffing the small blazes that would naturally clear underbrush, was a mistake.

We've understood for years that overgrazing and poorly planned logging contributed to the development of dense, highly flammable stands of scrawny trees.

We've seen how crowding undermines the overall health of the forest, making trees more vulnerable to insects and disease.

The U.S. Forest Service is working to thin the landscape, using both fire and mechanical means. Companies are starting to find commercial uses for narrow-diameter trees. Communities are getting residents to clear out vegetation..

But progress is slow. And the danger is high.

Arizona needs a broad, well-integrated plan to save our woodland communities.

The Governor's Forest Health Advisory and Oversight Councils has a promising draft, produced with the help of a cross section of interest. The "Statewide Strategy for Restoring Arizona's Forests" is open to public comment until June 5, with the goal of issuing the final version around the end of the month.

The 20-year plan includes stronger fire codes, better coordination and, of course, more money.

Yes, dollars do count.

The U.S. Forest Service alone spends more than \$30 million a year fighting fires in Arizona. Other federal agencies, the state and local communities spend millions more.

But the Forest Service gets just \$12 million to \$13 million annually to improve woodland health in Arizona.

If we spend more on prevention now, we can avoid huge firefighting tabs later. Plus, we'll save lives, property and habitat.

The draft plan calls on the federal government to put \$50 million a year into forest health in Arizona. The state Legislature would finance \$5 million a year in community wildfire protection.

For the size of the investment, the payoff is huge. And lasting.

To read the document on the Internet and offer comments by e-mail, go to www.azforests.info. Or call Jean Palumbo, strategy coordinator, at (928) 523-0608.