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We can restore forests

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Imagine escaping the desert heat to cool pine forests filled with healthy trees, abundant wildlife, birds and springs. Imagine the forest surrounding vibrant rural communities where forest restoration-based businesses provide good jobs, maintain forest health and reduce the threat of wildfire.

Is this some unrealistic, Utopian fantasy? Absolutely not. This is the forward-thinking vision Arizonans have crafted in the newly released "20-Year Strategy To Restore Arizona's Forests."

Over the past year and a half, Gov. Janet Napolitano's Forest Health Councils, made up of business people, environmentalists, ranchers, academics, elected officials, and federal, state and tribal land managers, have worked together to develop recommendations for restoring Arizona's forests and rural livelihoods. This strategy is steeped in optimism, long-range thinking and bold solutions.

We know that if we use rigorous science and strategically restore forested areas, we can reduce the threat of unnatural wildfire to our communities and natural resources. We know that, by doing these treatments, watersheds will be protected and wildlife habitat will improve.

We know that we can create rural jobs by removing excess wood and converting it to manufactured wood products and energy production. All Arizonans have a stake in protecting our forests, whether living in the pines or in the desert. The time is now.

The 20-year strategy builds from five key recommendations.

- The first is to increase the resources dedicated to the problem. Our federal and state land management agencies need more resources to bring the forests back to health.

Huge wildfires like the 469,000-acre Rodeo-Chediski Fire burned an area the size of metropolitan Phoenix and cost more than \$400 million. Without forest treatments, the question is not if there will be another Rodeo-Chediski but, rather, where and when. Isn't it smarter to invest in preventing fires rather than hemorrhaging money afterward?

- Second, better coordination among land managers, tribes, scientists, communities and private landowners is proposed so that limited dollars go further.

- Third is planning and acting strategically, at a scale of hundreds of thousands of acres, to place forest treatments so that they solve the worst problems first. As a part of the process, citizens would be engaged with the land managers to identify the most important places to protect.
- Fourth, we would actively engage and support the private sector to find uses and markets for the wood by-products of the forest health treatments. There isn't enough public tax dollars alone to solve this problem. We need to develop appropriately sized businesses providing private dollars to restore Arizona's forests.
- Finally, there would be ongoing efforts to help citizens and influential decision-makers understand this problem and their role in the solution. From private homeowners using fire-wise techniques around their houses, to land managers and elected officials taking action, there is a role for many.

The "20-Year Strategy To Restore Arizona's Forests" demonstrates how far we have come to solve a major environmental, social and economic problem. Recent wildfires and drought have helped galvanize support for fixing our forests. The strategy will be presented Thursday for approval by the Governor's Forest Health Council .

Let's think bold, act large and work together to restore Arizona's forests. For more information, you can visit www.azforests.org.

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