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Healthy beginning

Forest 'stewardship' contract is good start to reviving our forests

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The awarding of the nation's first large-scale "stewardship contract" to an Arizona forest-products partnership may not exactly constitute the dawn of a new day for America's public forest lands.

But it means there's a glimmer of light on the horizon.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Forest Service announced that Future Forest Partnership, L.L.C. - an Arizona-based limited partnership made up of small companies already in the business of harvesting small-diameter trees - was awarded a contract to thin up to 25,000 acres of choked, dying forest land in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests each year over the next 10 years.

Acting under the authority provided by the federal Healthy Forests Act, the Forest Service to date has inked about 20 contracts for thinning projects.

But until Tuesday's announcement, all of the contracts had been for miniscule plots of land. This is the first contract that is expected to make a real difference.

It is encouraging that the initial reaction to the award among environmental groups has been positive. They reportedly are pleased that a local group had won the contract.

A major concern of green groups - that rapacious loggers would sweep in under the cover of Healthy Forests - seems to have been assuaged by the good reputation of the principals of the Future Forest organization. From that aspect, at least, it looks like the Forest Service has made a wise choice for this important contract.

The contract will not be judged on good public relations alone, however. An important part of the Healthy Forests legislation was that it would provide a cost-effective means of performing wholesale remediation to millions of acres of the nation's dying forest land.

In the initial stages of this contract, the Forest Service anticipates spending \$380 an acre on treatment - a substantial reduction from the \$500 to \$700 the service has been spending in recent years.

More important, however, the service anticipates rapidly descending costs as the market for small-diameter forest products matures. That is a big reason why this first-ever large-scale contract is significant.

The Forest Service has two goals in awarding these contracts: protect forest communities and rehabilitate the choked forests.

As Regional Forester Harv Forsgren noted Tuesday, these contracts, which engage the private sector, provide our only reasonable chance of attaining either of those goals.

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