

# Arizona's wildfire solutions languish

State sees little progress in implementing proposals to protect life and property

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In the wake of 2002's devastating Rodeo-Chediski Fire, state policy makers surveyed the miles of charred ponderosa stands and set out to devise a plan that would prevent or at least minimize future infernos.

In 2007, after years of study, a group appointed by then-Gov. Janet Napolitano issued its landmark report, offering dozens of recommendations.

Some proposals were directed at the federal government, which controls the vast majority of forested land in the state.

But there were distinct roles for the state: Mapping progress on forest-thinning, no matter who was removing fuels that had built up over the decades. Funding efforts to clear space around homes in communities that border forest land and chaparral. Creating a building code for those areas that would require fireproof materials, such as metal roofs.

Six years later — a period that has seen 23 men die while fighting wildfires and 1.8 million acres consumed by fire — few of those ideas have become reality, according to an *Arizona Republic* review of a decade of state forest policy.

Most of the recommendations have been lost in the transition between administrations, thwarted by the fierce defense of private-property rights and slowed by the sheer magnitude of the proposals. Budget cuts brought on by the recession slowed or stopped some of the intended policies.

"I think the best you can point to is things that have happened despite the state," said Sandy Bahr of the Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Projects designed to thin the forest and reduce the risk to properties have been carried out by local groups and the federal government, such as work that minimized damage to forested communities from the 2011 Wallow Fire. The state helped coordinate those projects, but the funding came from federal grants.

Although fire-scarred landscapes serve as a constant reminder, policy makers' attention was often pulled to other pressing issues. In recent years, the state budget crisis, gun control and Medicaid expansion consumed the Legislature's time and energy.

This year, Arizonans have once again been reminded of wildfire's deadly and destructive power. As the state mourns the 19 firefighters who died battling the Yarnell Hill Fire, a blueprint exists to reduce the conditions that allow fires to rip through overgrown chaparral and forests and destroy lives and property. But the plan has languished for lack of money and leadership.

Rep. Kate Brophy McGee, R-Phoenix, said rural and forest issues can get lost in the urban-centric focus of the state Legislature. But the Yarnell Hill Fire deaths are a painful call to action.

"Shouldn't that be the impetus to look at these policies and say, 'Are we doing enough?' " she asked.

**Little follow-through**

The recommendations from the statewide Forest Health Council, which then-Gov. Napolitano appointed, created the blueprint for what the state could do to reduce the risks of wildland fire. The plan was embraced by Gov. Jan Brewer when she re-established the Forest Health Council in 2009 to emphasize the need to carry out the blueprint, which had no deadline for completion.

“In ’07, when we did that report, it put us way ahead of the states,” said Diane Vosick, director of policy and partnerships at Northern Arizona University’s Ecological Restoration Institute and a member of the governor’s Forest Health Council. “It created a road map.”

She credits the report with helping to bring about creation of the Four Forest Restoration Initiative, an ambitious plan to thin thousands of acres of overgrown land in the Apache-Sitgreaves, Coconino, Kaibab and Tonto national forests.

While the state collaborated in planning for the project, which has had a rocky start, it has done little to speed up fire-prevention efforts on land it controls. Nor has there been any progress in passing building and fire codes for the areas where development borders forest land and chaparral.

“There’s not a lot of appetite for telling people what they can and cannot do in the forest,” Vosick said.

Besides, the majority of lawmakers in Arizona believe the problem rests with the federal government, which controls 45 percent of the land in Arizona boundaries, much of it heavily forested. That disdain for what many see as federal negligence outweighed any ambition to follow through on state-specific solutions.

*The Arizona Republic* tracked the recommendations directed at the state, but found little progress.

For example, one recommendation urged the Arizona Department of Transportation to use the byproducts of forest thinning, such as small-diameter trees, for guardrails and other maintenance needs.

But ADOT officials said *The Republic’s* follow-up request had not “rung any bells” among its engineers.

In fact, many state agencies contacted for this story knew little to nothing about the recommendations contained in the Statewide Strategy for Restoring Arizona’s Forests.

“Most of that stuff just went by the wayside, whether because of politics or because they were so long-range,” said former state Rep. Tom O’Halloran, who served on the panel.

Among the casualties: a forest-health scorecard to track progress on the council’s recommendations toward reducing fire risk and restoring forests to a healthy state with fewer trees per acre.

“Such a snapshot would be an informative resource. ... There just weren’t the resources,” Andrew Wilder, the governor’s spokesman, wrote in response to a request for the scorecard.

Wilder didn’t respond to a follow-up e-mail when asked how progress can be measured if there isn’t a tool to do so.

Money, or the lack of it, was a stumbling block for many proposals. Budget cuts halted work on projects that could help Arizona better track what’s happening in its wildlands.

For example, the governor’s Forest Health Council called for creation of the Arizona Fire Map to track efforts to clean up overgrown forests and chaparral. But after mapping the area around Flagstaff, the program stalled because of a lack of money.

Another proposal to direct \$5 million a year toward wildfire-protection efforts for Arizona communities was whittled down. A one-time, \$1 million allocation was swept during the budget crisis in early 2009 and never restored.

Instead of preventing wildfires, the state has spent its money battling them. There is no state funding to help prevent fires in rural wildland areas, whether it be removing hazardous fuels or developing data to help guide such efforts. The state Forestry Division's \$7 million budget this year includes a \$1 million boost to its fire suppression budget, for a total of \$4 million, but nothing for fire prevention.

Other ideas died for lack of support. A key recommendation from the 2007 plan called for a "wildland-urban interface" fire code to protect communities and developed areas that border forested areas. But the idea was quickly dismissed since not all Arizona communities have a wildland border, said state Fire Marshal Bob Barger.

That proposal came after O'Halleran introduced a wide-ranging bill in 2004 designed to minimize risk in the wildland-urban interface and create a building code. It contained financial penalties if a property owner failed to clear the area around his or her land. The bill fell flat, even as the state was still reeling from 2002's Rodeo-Chediski Fire, which consumed more than 468,000 acres. Private-property rights trumped concerns about building fire-prone structures in the forest.

O'Halleran, a Republican from Sedona who represented north-central Arizona, said the state needed to act because growth would continue to push into forested areas, where thick stands of trees would increase the risk to people and property.

But opponents, from real-estate agents to cabin owners, said the bill smacked of Big Brother infringing on private-property rights.

One lawmaker at the time boiled down the objections to the bill after talking to a constituent who had a home in the forest: "It's his cabin, and if it burns down, it's his problem."

Former state Sen. Sylvia Allen, now a supervisor in rural Navajo County, said state laws that tell people how to take care of their property are non-starters.

"I think we look at people's properties like it's ours to tell them what to do," she said. It's better, she said, to let local governments and communities deal with the issue.

Navajo County does not have building codes for the forested areas because population centers aren't the wildfire risk, Allen said. The bigger threat is in the forest, and that's why the federal government needs to act, she said.

### **Getting 'Firewise'**

Perhaps the biggest accomplishment to date has been a heightened awareness of fire prevention in Arizona's wildlands.

Todd Schulke served on the governor's Forest Health Council from its inception in 2003 until last year. He credits the council with educating the public on issues such as creating defensible space around a home — to boost its chances of surviving a fire — and helping to define the wildland-urban interface, so property owners would better understand the hazards that exist when development meets the edge of the forest.

The number of “Firewise” communities has grown since the council drew attention to how to live safely in the forest, he said. The national program preaches tactics to minimize wildfire risk to communities and property. Since 2007, when the council first issued recommendations, the number of Firewise communities in Arizona has more than doubled, to 51.

The Legislature in 2004 also approved a package of tax breaks to create momentum for a forest-products industry. The hope is the tax credits would be an incentive for companies to convert forest byproducts into pellets or biomass for heating, or turn small-diameter trees into furniture, building materials or even highway guardrails. But few firms have applied for the tax credits, according to the state Department of Revenue, a sign of the moribund state of trying to incentivize an industry that revolves around scrappy trees and woody brush.

Nonetheless, the Legislature last year extended the credits, due to expire in 2014, for another decade.

One of the council’s recommendations that has become reality was the creation of a public-education coordinator position to promote information on fire management, how to protect communities in and near wildlands and the importance of sustainable businesses that use the byproducts of forest thinning. Carrie Dennett holds that position within the Forestry Division, but her duties also include responding to the media and other tasks.

Steve Campbell is a cooperative extension agent for the University of Arizona, stationed in Show Low to work with local communities on forest issues. He’s served on the council since its beginnings, and sat through countless meetings. While he said there’s been little to work with from the Legislature in terms of policy or funding, local communities have forged ahead.

“Change has got to come from the Legislature,” he said, referring to ambitious goals, such as building codes for forested areas. “We (communities) just work with what we have and make it work.”

Federal grants, administered through the state, have helped spread the word about defensible space. That’s made it easier, in an area where property rights are king, to sell the idea of thinning trees on private property, Campbell said.

### **Faulting the feds**

In recent years, most legislative efforts dealing with forests and fires have centered on rebuking the federal government rather than minimizing and preventing wildfires. Many state GOP lawmakers believe federal agencies are the biggest impediment to restoring forests to a healthy state, and they’ve pounded home that point in bills and resolutions.

Last year, several Republican lawmakers introduced a bill that would have sent a formal message to Congress demanding the federal government relinquish control of all of its public land in Arizona to the state. Another measure urged Congress to turn over all federal Bureau of Land Management property to the state. Both ideas stalled in committees.

An Arizona law authorizes the state Department of Environmental Quality to issue notices of violation to federal agencies for air pollution if a fire erupts on federal land. There have been no such notices, records show, but the message of the bill is clear: Lawmakers believe the federal government is to blame for massive wildfires and should be held to account.

But Arizona voters aren't on board with kicking the federal government out of the state. A 2012 ballot measure inspired by Rep. Chester Crandell's bill to have the state declare itself sovereign over all land, air, water and natural resources within state boundaries was thumped at the polls, with only 32 percent support.

Last year, a proposal to divert \$20 million from a land-conservation program and use it for forest restoration died. Urban lawmakers rallied to protect dollars they argued were intended to help expand desert preserves in Scottsdale and Phoenix.

"They're doing nothing," Brophy McGee lamented of her colleagues at the Legislature. She supported the idea of shifting the funds to the rural areas.

She attributes the lack of work on forest issues to "the whole rural-urban thing."

"The forests aren't where the big population centers are," she said. People don't see the connection between a healthy forest and such things as watershed protection or tourism to boost the rural economy, she added.

And then there's the daunting task of trying to loosen the state's purse strings.

"If you have a choice between the teacher in your kid's classroom and a quarter-acre of forest management, which is more attractive?" she asked.

### **Next steps unclear**

Though this season's blazes and firefighter casualties have raised awareness of overgrown chaparral and forests, lawmakers are waiting for the formal investigation of the Yarnell Hill Fire before deciding whether policy changes or new laws are needed.

Rep. Brenda Barton, chairwoman of the House Agriculture and Water Committee, said she wants to drive home the link between a healthy forest and Arizona's water supply. Thinning the forests will not only cut the demand that thick stands of vegetation make on Arizona's water but also will reduce the risk of wildfire, which can harm the state's watersheds, she said.

Barton, R-Payson, said she wants to talk to Brewer's office before crafting any legislation, to ensure a good chance of any bill getting signed into law.

"Now we need some action," Barton said. "Of course, it's going to take some money to do that. I'm prepared to fight for it."

It also will take leadership.

Brewer has had little to say about forest health and preventing wildland fires, focusing her attention on getting federal emergency relief for individuals affected by the Yarnell Hill Fire.

The request was denied late Friday. Her office is considering an appeal.

The Sierra Club's Bahr said she expects forest- and fire-related bills to be introduced in 2014.

But she doubts they will address issues that would reduce wildfire risk.

"The Legislature is really good at reacting with a lot of hyperbole," Bahr said. "But I'd be really surprised if they looked at land-use policies at all."