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Experts reveal what it takes to save the forest

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Environmentalists, politicians, bureaucrats and foresters alike maintain that a properly reinvented timber industry can save us before we all burn down.

Well, maybe.

But it's complicated.

Just ask Allen Reidhead — whose family has operated sawmills in Arizona for six generations, one of the key speakers at a recent forest health conference in Payson.

"It's not just you — or me — that's going to make the difference, but the community coming together so we can protect ourselves and protect towns like Payson or Show Low. We're just one match, one lightning strike away from being lost. What do the powers-that-be really want? Do you want to save that watershed? But what are you willing to do?"

And maybe also talk to Brad Worsley, trying to save the only biomass-burning power plant in Arizona — which holds the economic key to forest thinning efforts across a vast swath of unhealthy, overcrowded, wildfire-prone land in northern Arizona.

"We've burned to the ground one-quarter of our national forest in just 20 years. That's not sustainable. I can't imagine any business that could see this kind of catastrophic failure in its execution and not recognize we're in a dramatic state of emergency," said the Novo Power chief executive.

He spoke in the shadow of the Arizona Corporation Commission's recent decision to not require Arizona Public Service to generate some 60 megawatts of power annually from biomass. The decision could force the shutdown of the Novo Power biomass power plant in three years, unless Salt River Project or some other power company pays more for biomass power to save the watershed and reduce the risk of mega-fires.

"On every given acre, half of the biomass has little to no value," said Worsley. "That kind of mass will bury any business in the forest industry. There's just not sufficient margin, when you can be out of work for five months (in the winter) and housing drops and wood values plummet. If you want a model that works, you can't have the albatross of low-value biomass around the neck of an industry that's struggling to survive."

The day-long conference mostly focused on what it would take to revive the timber industry and meet the ambitious, 50,000-acre-a-year target set by the Four Forest Restoration

Initiative (4FRI). After eight years and four changes of contractors, 4FRI has thinned only about 15,000 acres. Repeatedly, the small-scale and limited experience of the contractors has been compounded by the lack of a market for the biomass they must remove to restore the forest.

In the same time, the sawmill and the Novo Power biomass power plant they operate have sustained thinning efforts that have cleared more than 70,000 acres. Earlier efforts by the White Mountain Stewardship Project likely saved both Alpine and Springerville from the Wallow Fire.

Reidhead and Worsley both spoke at the Payson forest health conference organized by the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension at Gila Community College. They provided a dose of reality when talking about what it will take to reduce tree densities on 4 million acres from 1,000 per acre to 100 per acre.

The two businessmen said those thinning efforts will determine whether Payson, Show Low, Pinetop and Pine go the way of Paradise, Calif. Last year 85 people died when a wildfire burned Paradise to the ground — a catastrophe all the experts predicted would play out some day in the West.

Worsley and Reidhead both rejected the polarizing narrative that blames either the lawsuits of environmentalists or the greed of industry for the plight of the forests today.

Reidhead put the evolution of the forest products industry in Arizona into perspective.

“I’m a sixth-generation forester. Sawmills are kind of in my blood. My first memories are being out in the forest with my dad and the stories he would tell me” about hauling logs with draft horses.

His family started in the business when loggers were cutting down huge, centuries-old ponderosa pines “with a value of $5,000 a load. It was a different dynamic — a lot of little contractors. Like when my grandpa started out, it was just him and his boys — but that operation grew to 30 or 40 employees.”

He remembers the “timber wars” with environmentalists trying to restrict logging and the forest industry still focused on the dwindling number of old-growth trees.

“It started to become one or the other — close the forest, don’t touch it, or we have to make as much money as possible and to do that we have to get the wood out that we can make money on.”

But ultimately, the changes in the forest changed the economics of the forest industry. “We were at the end of the 300- or 400-year life cycle of the big, high-value trees. You’d go back to an area you’d worked and there were just three big trees left — 80 feet tall — 30-inch diameter. One was dead on the ground and the next one was dying, dropping needles. They were getting to where we just didn’t have enough water to support some larger trees — there weren’t any harvestable trees left, so the timber industry had to change.

“After the timber wars and the Endangered Species Act, they saw there was no future in putting millions and millions back into the industry — so every thing closed. We went from hundreds of loads and 350 million board feet to almost zero coming off,” he recalled.

His family moved to the Valley and took up clearing desert land for big subdivisions.

Now, loggers, environmentalists, local officials and the Forest Service all agree on the need for a forest industry that can make a profit on the millions of tons of small trees choking almost every acre of forest — trees from 8 to 18 inches in diameter. Along with those trees comes the brush, branches and debris that make up the biomass — roughly half of the material that needs to be removed.

His family came back to the White Mountains and opened a sawmill, thanks largely to the White Mountain Stewardship Project, which ended up thinning some 50,000 acres in 10 years. In that case, the Forest Service paid about $800 per acre to deal with the biomass and the retooled sawmill turned the small trees into profitable products.

“People started to look at each other and say, ‘I don’t want the forest to burn and you don’t want the forest to burn — so why don’t we come together and do something?’ But one of the hardest challenges is that it’s all government land. Who’s going to risk millions of dollars in a government-operated forest? I’ve talked to people nationwide and they say, you’re crazy. But here’s what makes it happen: We’ve all come together.”

Worsley came to a similar conclusion, seeing the effect that operating a biomass power plant had on thinning efforts in the White Mountains. The group of small companies nurtured by the White Mountain Stewardship Project.

“We need to build an industry that can clear 50,000 acres a year sustainably,” he said.

For now, that means creating a market for biomass power plants — even if the energy costs more than power generated by natural gas.

“If someone had some way to magically turn the biomass into jet fuel or biochar, they would have a wonderful business and be very wealthy — but that’s not how it’s working,” he said.

The first Forest Service phase in 4FRI cleared more than 100,000 acres for thinning, with all the environmental work done in a single, massive effort.

“The expectation was they’d clear 200,000 acres. So far, they’ve cleared 13,000. There isn’t a disposal mechanism for biomass, there just isn’t. So the work has stopped.”

In the same timeframe, the non-4FRI groups in the White Mountains have cleared 150,000 acres, half of it on federal land. “And that’s because there’s a biomass plant here in between Heber and Snowflake.”

The inexorable economics of generating power from biomass means someone must provide a subsidy for biomass to compete with natural gas or solar energy. That subsidy can come in the form of power companies paying more and passing the cost along to customers or federal and state grants.

“This will only happen if there’s the political will to do so. If we don’t, we’ll burn. If we had happen here what happened in Paradise — Arizona could have the solutions in place in 30 days. We know what’s sustainable, what is executable. We need to burn a million green tons of biomass every year.”

Source: https://www.paysonroundup.com/news/forest_management_wildfires/experts-reveal-what-it-takes-to-save-the-forest/article_a5d86bcc-9414-5af1-b077-5cf6f23cbfbc.html