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4FRI takes next step in nation's largest forest restoration project

FLAGSTAFF, AZ – The largest forest restoration project in the country is one step closer to restoring 2.4 million acres of degraded, overgrown ponderosa pine forest across northern Arizona. On March 29 the U.S. Forest Service published an environmental analysis on the first phase of the Four Forest Restoration Initiative, known as 4FRI, marking the start of the formal 60-day public comment period.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement, or Draft EIS, analyzes approximately one million acres across the Coconino and Kaibab National Forests, two of the four forests included in the initiative. The document proposes wildlife habitat enhancement and spring restoration, and identifies areas for thinning, prescribed burning or both. These restoration treatments aim to reduce the risk of unnatural wildfire to communities and forests and seek to restore forest health and resiliency. The release of the Draft EIS represents a major milestone in the 4FRI goal of restoring one million acres in northern Arizona over the next 20 years.

“We are excited to be involved in a process that will achieve large-scale forest restoration in northern Arizona for the next 20 years,” said Steve Gatewood, 4FRI Stakeholder Group rotating Co-chair and former director of the Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership. “As the largest collaborative forest restoration project in the country, the 4FRI Stakeholder Group will be reviewing the DEIS and looks forward to ultimately restoring long-term forest health and resilience to our landscape.”

The 4FRI Stakeholder Group consists of more than 30 organizations including conservationists, scientists, local governments, and industry leaders. The group has been working collaboratively over the past several years to restore the health of four Arizona national forests—Coconino, Kaibab, Tonto and Apache-Sitgreaves. The 4FRI Draft EIS is a critical step in the collaborative process and is the first in the nation to cover such a large area.

“The publication of the DEIS is another critical step forward for the 4FRI project. It affords the public with the opportunity to provide robust feedback to the Forest Service in order to ensure that the final EIS and Record of Decision will fully meet with the expectations outlined in the social license requested by the Regional Forester and developed by the 4FRI stakeholders over the last four years,” said Navajo County Supervisor David Tenney. “We look forward to continuing to work with the Forest Service toward an expeditious completion of the NEPA process and a swift implementation of the restoration treatments at the scale and pace outlined in the 4FRI Request for Proposal, starting with 15,000 acres this year.”

Public input on this draft analysis will help shape a final decision that will lay out a 10-year plan for forest restoration treatments. The 4FRI Stakeholder Group has worked side-by-side with the Forest Service in an open public process to form the issues that are analyzed in this document. The group will continue their involvement through a series of informative public meetings hosted by the Forest Service for the Draft EIS review.

The public is encouraged to attend the series of public meetings to learn more about this project, meet the Forest Service project team and 4FRI stakeholders, and provide input. To review and comment on the Draft EIS, visit the 4FRI Forest Service website at www.fs.usda.gov/main/4fri/planning. For a listing of dates, times and locations of public meetings, visit www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5413832.pdf. For more information on the 4FRI Stakeholder Group, visit www.4fri.org. To get involved, visit www.4fri.org/getinvolved.