



# Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project



CITY OF  
**FLAGSTAFF**



Paul Oltrogge, Wildland Fire Battalion Chief, [poltrogge@flagstaffaz.gov](mailto:poltrogge@flagstaffaz.gov), 928-600-6951  
Neil Chapman, Wildland Fire Captain, [neil.chapman@flagstaffaz.gov](mailto:neil.chapman@flagstaffaz.gov), 928-606-9840

The City of Flagstaff's Wildland Fire Management Program (WFM), managed within the Flagstaff Fire Department (FFD), has been supporting fire adapted community efforts since 1996. The WFM's mission is to increase and maintain wildfire resilience for the City of Flagstaff, Summit Fire & Medical District, and priority watersheds.

## Background:

- Founding member of the Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership in 1996
- Community Wildfire Protection Plan completed in 2005
- City of Flagstaff Wildland Urban Interface Code adopted in 2008
- Since 2012, the Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project (FWPP) has completed 10,255 acres of wildfire risk reduction thinning.
- Northern Arizona University completes the FWPP Cost Avoidance Study in October 2014
- In February 2020, The City of Flagstaff closed a loan with the Arizona Water Infrastructure Finance Authority (WIFA) regarding financing the remaining balance of the Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project (FWPP) Bond. The recently closed Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) loan features \$1 million in forgivable principal. Combined with interest savings on forgivable principal, this will result in a \$1.4 million savings for Flagstaff's property taxpayers.
- Starting in the summer of 2020, the City of Flagstaff created the Water Resource and Infrastructure Protection Fee to provide stable and reliable funding for WFM. This fee is part of a larger municipal services billing restructure based on consumption that maintained monthly water costs for average water volume users while raising costs for large volume water users.
- The Hepa Filter Donation Program was initiated by WFM and the Sustainability Division in 2020
- WFM hosted Arizona's first Prescribed Fire Training Exchange in 2021
- WFM staff appointed to the Federal Wildfire Mitigation and Management Commission in 2022
- City, State, Federal and NGO funds designated for FWPP have always been unrestricted or project specific and can be used for any agreed upon forest health treatment. Coconino County Flood Control District funds are self-restricted to steep slope areas defined as slopes greater than 30%.
- Prescribed fire has proven to be the most effective, nature-based way to maintain thinning treatment investments.

## 2022-2023 Updates:

- 25,304 acres are planned for mechanical thinning contract offerings over 5 years within City Limits and the Upper Rio de Flag watershed (Avoided cost estimate \$616M - \$1.2B)
- 18,608 acres are planned for mechanical thinning contract offerings over 5 years within the Lake Mary watershed (Avoided cost estimate = \$106M - \$271M)

- Federal FY22: USFS committed \$11.6M to FWPP over 5 years for project implementation.
  - o This \$\$ is not currently planned to be transferred to the City of Flagstaff.
  - o In 2022, \$1.5M was committed to FWPP for additional service items within the Dry Lake Hills Service Contract.
  - o No additional allocation of this funding is planned for Federal FY23.
  
- The City of Flagstaff and USFS are working through agreement details for a \$3.5M Community Project Funding allocation that was included in the FY2022 Omnibus Appropriations bill. This funding will support wildfire risk reduction thinning in the Upper Lake Mary Watershed in partnership with the Coconino National Forest, National Forest Foundation, the Department of Defense Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program, and Coconino County.
  
- The Upper Rio de Flag watershed is about 50K acres. Working collaboratively, the Flagstaff Ranger District and City of Flagstaff have prioritized this landscape since 2012.
  - o Comprehensive wildfire risk reduction requires landscape level investments (Bain & Company, Accelerating Forest Restoration, 2020)
  - o Over 25K acres of mechanical thinning is planned to be offered over the next 5 years within the Upper Rio de Flag watershed and inside City Limits.
  - o These acres are incredibly important to the growing forest restoration product utilization industry based on the west side of Northern Arizona's ponderosa pine forest.
  - o A reliable supply of ground-based mechanical acres is the #1 need for private sector businesses to continue to invest in this work, reducing the per acre cost for all projects.
  
- Northern Arizona has a 25-year track record of science, monitoring, and response-based experience when it comes to the effectiveness of wildfire risk reduction based mechanical thinning. Treatments on steep slopes are a relatively new approach in northern Arizona and treatment effectiveness is still being studied.
  
- Two new areas in the Upper Rio de Flag watershed have been identified by the City, USFS and Coconino County as priorities that require new analysis through the federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process:
  - o **The Leroux Project Analysis** includes 1600 acres just north of Fort Valley in between Hart Prairie Road and Snowbowl Road. This analysis is expected to be completed by Summer 2024. Contracts may be awarded in 2025. This site includes an estimated 900 acres of steep slope projects. The impact and cost of Leroux Project treatments cannot be determined until the analysis is complete with site specific thinning prescriptions and fire effects models.
  - o **The Fort Valley Experimental Forest (FVEF)** includes 1,250 acres and **borders nearly 4 miles of private lands in the Fort Valley community**. No timeline is in place yet for this analysis, but FVEF staff are actively pursuing this project with partners. No steep slope acres are included in this project.
  
- Requests for additional Federal investments are most effective when the process is comprehensive, science based, and collaborative.