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Flagstaff Funds Wildfire Prevention with Bonds.

The Arizona city is likely the only in the country to pay for wildfire prevention with bond money and is being looked to as a national model for leveraging federal funds.

The cash-strapped U.S. Forest Service is way behind in treating its lands to prevent wildfires. So Flagstaff, a northern Arizona city that sits in the middle of a national forest and sees 300 fires a year, is paying for treatment on nearby federal lands itself.

The city is spending \$10 million to thin 15,000 acres of forest in an effort to make Flagstaff more resilient in the face of bigger forest fires, floods, violent storms and temperature extremes. The money is coming from city bonds funded by a property tax hike approved two years ago.

Work on state-owned land has already started, but the biggest share of the effort, in the Coconino National Forest, could start as soon as next spring.

It is, as far as Flagstaff leaders can tell, the only city in the country tapping bond money for wildfire prevention. A handful of other cities, such as Denver, Santa Fe, N.M. and Ashland, Ore., have paid for similar efforts with other funding sources.

“We could just continue to pound on our congressman and senators and the Forest Service” for more federal money to fund the treatment, said Paul Summerfelt, the Flagstaff fire department’s wildland fire management officer. “The end result of that is just a lot of yelling and screaming and not a lot gets done ... There’s not enough money in the Treasury for the work that needs to be done.”

Instead, the city has worked for nearly two decades to try to mitigate the damage of nearby fires. “When all of this began to emerge, there was a paradigm in the community that every tree was good, every fire was bad and we needed to save everything,” Summerfelt said.

But the city government, with the fire department taking the lead, showed residents the benefits of forest management by treating woods and using controlled burns, mostly on private lands. Researchers at Northern Arizona University, which is in Flagstaff, helped educate the public, too. The city adopted a new fire code to address the threat of wildfires specifically . In 2006, residents saw how a fire that raged in untreated forests quieted when it reached treated areas.

The difference is most easily seen after fires are put out, Summerfelt said. Untreated areas are black; treated areas are still green. “It goes from a crown fire with 150-foot flames above the crowns of the trees down to a ground fire, where it’s 3 or 4 feet off the ground and we can deal with it,” he said. Often, residents can return to their homes the evening after a fire enters a treated area.

By the time the bond question went before Flagstaff residents in 2012, it passed with 74 percent of the vote.

Since Flagstaff agreed to pay for the project out of its own pockets, the city has attracted another \$1.6 million in grants. Most of that has come from the U.S. Forest Service, because the agency is interested in using the project as a model for how to leverage federal funds in other areas,

Summerfelt said.

The effort comes as wildfires have become more common and costly. The years that have seen the most widespread fire damage, in terms of total acres burned, have all occurred since 2004. Three of those years — 2006, 2007 and 2012 — saw more than 9 million acres burned, roughly the size of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined. The costs of putting out the fires are also mounting. The annual bill for fire suppression nationwide topped \$1.7 billion in each of the last three years.

Experts say the fires are becoming more dangerous because of global warming, a build-up of fuel in forests and the encroachment of development into forested areas.

Flagstaff itself has seen increasingly volatile weather, said city manager Kevin Burke. The city, with an elevation of 7,000 feet, has endured brutal snowstorms, searing heat and even tornadoes in recent years.

But the main threat comes from forest fires and the flooding that often follows those fires. Flagstaff's treatment plan focuses on two areas near town where that flooding would be especially dangerous.

The first is the Dry Lake Hills area north of town, and adjacent to a swath of land that burned four years ago. High winds burned 15,000 acres in the 2010 Schultz wildfire, which forced 1,000 residents from their houses and stripped the slopes of the San Francisco Peaks. When torrential rains came four weeks later, rivers of dark water washed out roads, broke water lines and killed a 12-year-old girl in a flash flood.

But the consequences would be even worse, if a large fire broke out in the Dry Lake Hills, city officials said, because it would pose a greater threat to downtown and the campus of Northern Arizona University.

The second area targeted for treatment is near Lake Mary, south of Flagstaff, which supplies half of the city's water. Floodwaters filled with soot and sediment could render the city's water treatment plant on the lake useless. To make up for the lost water, the city would have to drill 11 new wells at the cost of \$2 million apiece.

Without city action, the selected areas are unlikely to attract interest from private companies that bid on forest management projects, said Burke. Some of the areas are so steep that cables or helicopters would be needed to remove logs. Other parts are populated by trees that are too thin to make good lumber.

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