

# ARTICLE SUBMISSION

## Kaibab National Forest



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By: Jacqueline Banks, 928-635-8314

### **Kaibab National Forest Teams with Native American Organization to Improve Forest Health and Provide Employment Opportunities**

TUSAYAN, Ariz. – The Kaibab National Forest recently teamed with an organization from the Alamo Navajo Indian Reservation to complete a fuels reduction and habitat improvement project on the forest's Tusayan Ranger District while providing employment opportunities for Alamo community members.

The project, which is located 4 miles southeast of Grandview Lookout along the Coconino Rim, involved the marking and cutting of 208 acres of ponderosa pine forest over a period of about 11 weeks for the purposes of ecosystem restoration, fuels reduction, and wildlife habitat improvement.

The crew members completing the physically-taxing forestry work were hired, trained and managed by Alamo Navajo School Board Inc., which has expanded since its creation in 1979 to include much more than education services for the Socorro County, New Mexico, Native American reservation. ANSBI not only operates the reservation's schools but also administers an Indian Health Clinic, Early Childhood Center, Adult Education Program, Roads Department, Technology Department, Wellness Center and more through grants and contracts with federal, state and tribal agencies, making it Alamo's primary employer.

"Alamo has a current 73 percent unemployment rate in the 18- to 34-year-old age group, and 55 percent of its members have never been in the workforce," said Bill Ferranti, natural resource specialist for the Alamo Natural Resources Department, a division of ANSBI.

That's why, according to Ferranti, a program was developed to establish and train an Alamo community natural resources management workforce, which would provide Alamo members with marketable skills and employment opportunities while simultaneously fulfilling a need to restore forested lands across the Southwest.

It was the program's success in restoring forested lands on the Cibola National Forest in New Mexico that first sparked Kaibab National Forest silviculturist Mark Nabel's interest in bringing the Alamo crew to the Kaibab. "I had heard about the work they had done with the Cibola, and when I contacted the Cibola's timber management officer, he gave the crew a glowing review," Nabel said.

Nabel was able to secure funding for the Tusayan fuels reduction project through the Coconino County Resource Advisory Committee, a local community group that provides recommendations on funding for projects that benefit resources on federal lands.

Nabel said the project competed well for funding due to the multiple benefits it provided including forest health improvement, employment opportunities, workforce training, and fuelwood for the nearby Cameron community and broader western Navajo Nation. Many Navajos rely on fuelwood as their primary heat source, so it was a valuable byproduct of the important fuels reduction work.

“Ideally, this project will serve as a template for the development of a similar crew in western Navajo Nation,” Nabel said. “On a personal note, I’m proud to be working on a project that puts money in the pocket of people who really need it, that provides valuable work experience to those who have very little, and that provides people with an incentive to make positive life decisions.”

Specifically, the work on the Tusayan Ranger District involved marking trees to identify those to be removed and those to remain, using a hydraulic tree shear to cut the ponderosa pine trees identified for removal, and scattering the remaining slash to meet treatment specifications. Nabel said he was so pleased with the work accomplished by the ANSBI crew that he is already looking for ways to partner with the group next spring to thin additional acres on the Kaibab National Forest.

“I can honestly say that the highest quality thinning work that has been performed on the Tusayan Ranger District under contract since I’ve been working here was performed by the Alamo Navajo thinning crew,” Nabel said. “Aside from the actual work being performed, the crew was a pleasure to interact with – always good-natured, laughing and enjoying doing the work.”

Forest health conditions were so vastly improved by the crew’s efforts that Durvin “Tank” Apachito, the crew’s safety officer, noted “the way the forest has changed from the time we got here until the time we left” as a key source of pride. Crew leader Waylon Padilla found satisfaction in leading a Native American crew working on a National Forest.

With work on the 208-acre Tusayan project now complete, Nabel said he plans to continue pursuing grants and other sources of funding to allow the Kaibab National Forest partnership with ANSBI to continue.

“This was a great project, and it’s one that I think we can all be proud to have accomplished,” said Nabel.

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