NAU NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

Ecological Restoration Institute

Tribal Forest Stewardship and Restoration Program

Wood For Life Workshop April 2026

Background

Wood for Life (WFL) in northern Arizona is a collaborative network of organizations working to provide resources and a sustainable source of firewood to local Tribal and firewood-using communities through forest restoration efforts; to reduce forest-wide fuels; and to foster and strengthen partner relationships.



In April 2026, partners attended the third Wood For Life Workshop in Flagstaff, AZ. *Photo credit Jessica Archibald*

Purpose

The third WFL workshop in northern Arizona in April 2026 brought together regional partners to build capacity for firewood banks in the Four Corners region. The two-day workshop included one day dedicated to enterprise initiatives such as discussing establishing small businesses and LLCs for firewood distribution. The second day featured a field trip to observe forest restoration outcomes and the operational capacity of a Tribal wood bank. The Ecological Restoration Institute worked closely with partners including Southwest Decision Resources, National Forest Foundation, Coconino National Forest, Coalitions and Collaboratives (COCO), and Tribal nonprofit, village, and chapter leaders to develop this workshop and build capacity for WFL.

Participants

The workshop convened over 60 attendees both online and in-person at the City of Flagstaff's Aquaplex, Coconino National Forest, and Diné Ba'adeit'i's wood bank from April 28 - 29. In addition to the planning team, participants represented Navajo chapters, Hopi villages, local and national nonprofits (Alliance for Green Heat, Red Feather Development Group, Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps, Forest Stewards Guild, Diné Bá'ádeit'į́, Yee Ha'ólníi Doo, Tse'ii'ahi' Wood Hub, Defend Our Community, and Pikyanivi Wood Haulers), Tribal communities, and nearby national forests.

Goals

Over two days, participants in WFL came together with shared goals:

- Learn about opportunities for nonprofits, small businesses, chapters, villages, and individuals participating in WFL.
- Observe restoration operations on the Coconino National Forest and visit a WFL wood bank to discussion operations and see WFL in action.











Participants collaborated with partners and contributed to conversations at the April 2026 Wood For Life workshop in Flagstaff, AZ. *Photo credits Lindsay Riggs, Jessica Archibald, and Niki vonHedemann.*

Themes that Emerged at the Workshop:

Forest Health = Community Health

One of the prominent messages throughout the workshop was the connection between healthy forests and healthy communities. Dense forests are the result of a century of fire suppression and past forest management practices that increased the risks of wildfire. Current forest restoration to reduce wildfire risk removes small-diameter wood for which there is little to no market. Simultaneously, many families depend on firewood and coal to heat their homes. After the closure of the Navajo Generating Station and the Kayenta Coal mine, families became more reliant on firewood for their heating needs.

- The WFL partnership bridges these challenges by connecting forest restoration efforts with communities that need firewood.
- WFL provides an outlet for small diameter wood from restoration projects rather than leaving it in slash piles to burn during prescribed fire operations. Reducing pile size decreases wildfire risk while those piles dry in the forest and reduces smoke output when piles are burned.

Grant Writing as Storytelling

- Speakers discussed approaching grants strategically in telling a story rooted in cultural values and reflecting oneself. Moreover, speakers accentuated the significance of documenting work and collecting data to support funding requests and strengthen grant applications as the value of the work is demonstrated to funders and partners. Partners were encouraged to track information including:
  - Households served
  - Volunteer hours
  - Equipment used
  - Number of cords distributed
  - Partnerships or agreements created



A flow chart demonstrating the process of getting firewood from forests to communities.

Strength in Collaboration

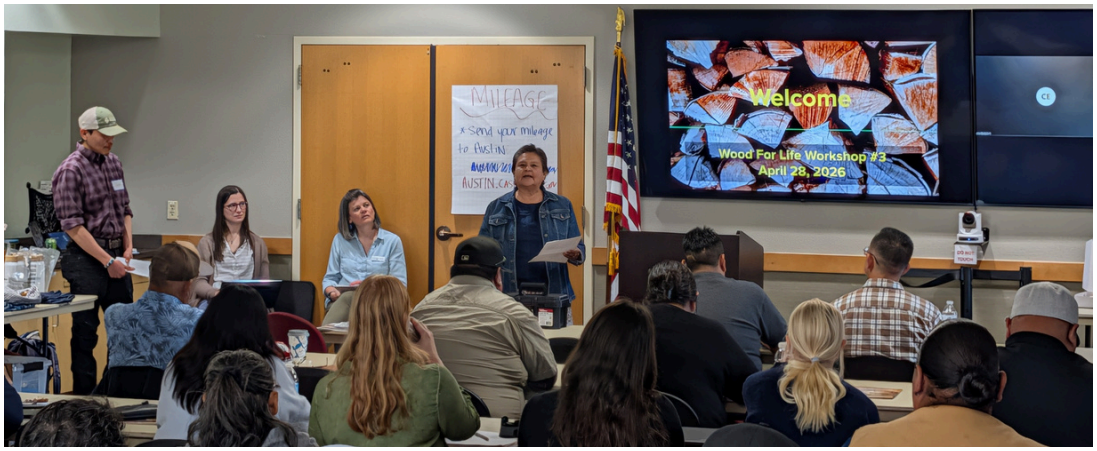
- A recurring theme was that no single organization can solve all the challenges alone. Cooperation, trust, and partnership among Tribes, nonprofits, federal agencies, businesses, and volunteers are crucial to long-term success. Together, these partners turn wood removed during restoration into an essential resource for home heating and cultural practices.
  - Partners can pool resources to manage their distribution systems, exchange expertise on best practices, and offer needed training.
  - Youth training and workforce development:
    - Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps partnered with the Forest Service in conducting restoration treatments in the national forest, training Tribal and non-Tribal youth in forest restoration efforts.
    - Crews and volunteers can take the knowledge, skills, and principles learned back to their communities and conduct community-led conservation

Tribal-led Enterprises and Indigenous Leadership

- The workshop highlighted Indigenous knowledge, values, and leadership as foundational elements of the partnership. Tribal communities have always been stewards for the forests and Traditional Ecological Knowledge was recognized as an essential guide in forest management.
  - Traditional Ecological Knowledge could be further incorporated in restoration projects through prescribed burns or collaborating with Indigenous nations and partners on forest restoration from planning through implementation and monitoring.
  - Tribal-led resources were offered for participants to utilize as tools for grant writing, business start-up, etc.
    - Tribal Funding Registry: A native-led program that connects financial opportunities to Tribal individuals and entities
    - Red Feather Development Group: An Indigenous-led nonprofit that provides housing assistance for Tribal communities and offers contract opportunities to wood banks in distributing firewood to communities.
  - The National Forest Foundation offered resources to assist with metrics, data, and maps of wood banks.
    - WFL hub site: A website with an integrated geographic information system that displays dynamic metrics and aggregated WFL data (e.g. households served, active and inactive wood banks, cords distributed, etc.).
      - Participants created an ArcGIS account to access internal maps and input their own wood bank data.











Participants collaborated with partners and contributed to conversations at the April 2026 Wood For Life workshop in Flagstaff, AZ. *Photo credits Lindsay Riggs, Jessica Archibald, and Niki vonHedemann.*

Self-Sufficiency and Proactive Mindset

- Speakers emphasized reducing reliance on outside assistance and building local capacity. Attendees were urged to step away from reacting to problems such as last-minute firewood shortages towards proactively planning for future firewood needs. Communities possess the knowledge and strength to build their own systems such as:
  - Employment opportunities in establishing tribal businesses and LLCs
  - Creating long-term infrastructure instead of relying on emergency aid
  - Researching training and certifications prospects
  - Diversifying funding sources
  - Building financially sustainable systems

Capacity Building

- Diné Ba'adeit'i's wood bank offered an opportunity to see key operational successes among participants. Best practices for running a successful WFL wood bank included:
  - Partnering with local entities such as chapters, volunteer networks, nonprofits, etc.
  - Using social media to spread word of mouth
  - Generating income through services and products such as new uses for restoration materials
- Training, certification, and skill-building emerged as priorities for sustaining community-led efforts. WFL partners are exploring the possibilities of offering or obtaining trainings on:
  - Chainsaw certification, safety, & FAL3 basic faller (entry-level chainsaw operator for crews) certification
  - Forest restoration
  - CPR and first aid certification
  - Stove inspections
  - ATV certification
  - Grant writing and business development

Looking Ahead

The workshop concluded with a focus on adaptability and resilience. Participants recognized challenges that will arise in the future including changing administration priorities, funding uncertainties, and workforce limitations. However, WFL will remain persistent and has already shown resilience through the challenges of COVID and the changing political climate. The collective message remains hopeful: be proactive, find strength in collaboration, and continue building sustainable systems to support future generations and honor Tribal values.

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https://eri.nau.edu/wood-for-life/

National Forest Foundation
https://www.nationalforests.org/program/northern-arizona-wood-for-life-partnership/