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Agency takes regional approach to beetle epidemic

By **BRODIE FARQUHAR**

Star-Tribune correspondent Monday, July 30, 2007

The onslaught of mountain pine beetle attacks on national [oas:casperstartribune.net/news/wyoming:Middle1] forests in northern Colorado and southern Wyoming has prompted the U.S. Forest Service's Rocky Mountain regional office to take a regional approach to the problem.

"It isn't a rosy picture," said Clint Kyhl, the bark beetle incident commander for the Medicine Bow-Routt, Arapaho and White national forests.

The beetle epidemic started in Colorado a few years ago, and has killed about half of the lodgepole pine forests in northern Colorado -- 660,000 infested acres of 1.5 million acres of lodgepole pine forests.

The situation is marginally better in southern Wyoming, Kyhl said, but only because the epidemic got started more recently. The Medicine Bow had 75,000 acres of infested lodgepole pine forests in 2006, and is looking at a potential infestation of 300,000 acres of 8-inch diameter lodgepoles or bigger.

Mountain pine beetles -- one of several bark beetles at work in Western forests -- prefers 8-inch and bigger trees for their insulation value to survive winters. Yet as the beetles take out all the bigger trees, they also attack and kill smaller trees, Kyhl said.

Kyhl characterized the ongoing outbreak of bark beetles as "a perfect storm" -- a confluence of naturally occurring cycles in beetle population growth, summer drought and mild winters, and uniform tree stand conditions. According to entomologists, beetles have cyclical surges in population, and the West is in one now. Drought weakens trees so they can't defend themselves against beetle attacks, and mild winters mean few beetles die and populations remain high.

"We've got huge stands of lodgepole pines that are 100 years old," Kyhl said, thanks to the economic activity of a century ago, when railroads needed railroad ties and miners needed to shore up walls and roofs of their mines. Vast stands of forest were cut down then, he said, and have regrown to create uniform stands of 8-inch-diameter or bigger trees.

Forest Service officials say the beetles could kill nearly all of the mature lodgepole and spruce trees in northern Colorado and part of Wyoming, jeopardizing water flows and watersheds, future timber production, wildlife habitat, recreation sites, transmission lines and scenic views. Beetle-killed trees also present a fuels buildup situation that could result in catastrophic wildland fires. These events pose threats to homes and property and could cause economic harm to communities.

Richard Stem, deputy forester for the Rocky Mountain region, said he has doubled the timber cut of the region and has emphasized vegetation treatment (harvest, prescribed fire, mechanical thinning) where he saw the greatest need: Front Range, Western Slope, San Juans and in Wyoming, the Shoshone and Black Hills national forests.

He expects the spruce beetle epidemic to play out in the Shoshone National Forest when the spruce are all killed in a few years. Stem said the Bighorn National Forest doesn't seem to be as threatened, and the Black Hills are stable.

Priorities

Kyhl said his team has three priorities in mitigating the epidemic, as there is no way to stop it.

"Our first priority is fuel reduction around communities to reduce the fire risk," he said.

Secondly, work crews are removing dead or dying trees where they are most hazardous to the public -- along roadsides, in campgrounds and near cell towers. Beetle-killed trees can fall over in less than five years, said Kyhl, so the Forest Service is working hard to avoid potential liability problems.

"Down the road, we're asking what do we want to see in future forests, after this epidemic has run its course," Kyhl said. His team wants to see increased biological diversity in the forest, a mix of aspen and conifers, and different age classes.

Kyhl and his team are also looking at a huge influx of trees into timber cutting programs, as millions of trees die.

"The lodgepole has about three years to be considered as saw timber, after it is killed by beetle infestation," Kyhl said. After that, the wood dries out and cracks, dramatically reducing its commercial value.

Yet it remains an open question whether there are enough sawmills in the region to handle the anticipated surge of available saw timber. Kyhl said Bighorn Lumber in Laramie is still open, while the Saratoga sawmill has been closed for several years.

Ironically, Stem said, Wyoming and the West have fewer sawmills at a time when beetle-killed forests are expected to produce a flood of saw timber.

"I'm hoping that if we provide enough saw timber, some closed sawmills will reopen," Kyhl said.

That may be overly optimistic thinking, according to Tom Troxel, Rocky Mountain director for the Intermountain Forestry Association.

"The lumber market is in the basement right now, with lumber fetching the lowest prices we've seen since the 1980s," Troxel said. Woes in the housing construction market, due to subprime mortgage abuses, are hurting the lumber market, he said.

Beetle-killed trees can be turned into good construction studs, he said, "but these are not high-value logs."

Troxel said the Saratoga sawmill could reopen, but he wouldn't hazard a guess as to when or by whom. Even further out there is the rumor that someone's figured how to put a sawmill on railroad cars, the better to take the mobile sawmill to where there's lots of timber to be had.

That may simply be wishful thinking, Troxel said.

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