

## Rocky Mountain News

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### Speakout: Pine beetles inflict ruin across West

By David Limtiaco

April 9, 2006

One does not have to look far to see that pine beetle infestations have reached epidemic proportions. Millions of acres of bark beetle-infested trees threaten communities, vital watersheds, key wildlife habitats, old-growth forests and popular recreation areas in much of the West.

While bark beetles have always been part of our Western forest's natural cycles, massive outbreaks are now reported from Alaska to New Mexico at a scale never seen before in the history of the United States.

Drought, coupled with uncharacteristically high temperatures, causes the trees to be susceptible to insect infestations. The bark beetles then deliver the knockout punch.

Predictions are that by the year 2020, 20 million acres of Western forests will experience significant tree mortality from bark beetles. That's an area larger than the state of Maine!

These unsightly beetle-kill trees decrease property and recreation values, and increase the risk of catastrophic wildfires, which in turn cause damage to soils and diminished drinking water quality.

Specific and proactive management actions are required to restore our forests and reduce the threats to communities from wildfire. Actively managing forests, such as thinning and opening dense stands of trees, will help to restore natural ecological processes.

Recent news articles from the popular ski resort town of Vail noted that "The north face of the Vail Mountain may be laden with trees now, but experts predict the pine beetles could leave the mountain as bald as the back bowls."

But the city of Vail is not surrendering to the effects of the beetle without a fight.

Like many other Western towns, Vail is forming a community-based collaborative group to tackle the challenge. The Northern Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative covers five western Colorado resort and ski counties with a focus on forest treatments like thinning and preventive spraying to protect homes, ski areas, recreation sites, and drinking water watersheds.

Vail is just one example of what is happening across the Western U.S. recognizing that public participation and community input, consistent with landowner objectives, must be a key element in identifying and assessing forest health restoration projects.

There's no telling for certain when this beetle epidemic will run its course. However, we do know that bugs are here to stay, and we can be better prepared for epidemics like the one currently gripping the West.

Proactively treating our forests makes economic sense and promotes healthy communities. Healthy forests not only support healthy ecosystems, but provide economic and social benefits to urban and rural communities, including recreation, forest products, clean water, wildlife habitat, scenic quality and jobs.

*David Limtiaco is the chairman of the Council of Western State Foresters ([www.westernstateforesters.org](http://www.westernstateforesters.org)). He is a resident of Guam.*

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