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Agencies working to fix bark-beetle problems

Guest opinion by Winston Wiggins and Jack Troyer

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Bark beetles are a natural agent of change for many of Idaho's forests. As forests grow old, they usually become more susceptible to bark beetles. However, massive outbreaks are now being reported from Alaska to New Mexico at a scale never seen before in the history of the United States due to a preponderance of large tracts of aging trees. The effects of climate change have essentially compounded this issue. Drought, coupled with uncharacteristically high temperatures, has increased susceptibility of trees to bark beetle attack. Unsightly, beetle-killed trees decrease property and recreation values, and increase the risk of catastrophic wildfires, which in turn damage the soil and diminish drinking water quality.

In central Idaho, one does not have to look far to see that bark-beetle infestations are killing millions of trees. These epidemics threaten to impact this region's communities, vital watersheds, key wildlife habitats, old-growth forests, and popular recreation areas. Private landowners in the area are desperately seeking solutions to a seemingly hopeless situation.

Specific and proactive forest management actions are required to restore our forests and reduce the threat to communities from wildfire. Treatments, such as thinning dense stands, will help surviving trees resist beetle attack because reducing stand density promotes vigorous, healthy trees. Healthier stands not only support healthier ecosystems, they provide economic and social benefits to urban and rural communities, including recreation, forest products, clean water, wildlife habitat and scenic quality.

The Idaho Department of lands and the U.S. Forest Service have responded to this problem. Since 2004, these agencies have partnered to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners in the Stanley Basin affected by the current outbreak of mountain-pine and Douglas fir beetles. Under the watchful eye of the grant coordinator, Mr. Jim Rineholt of the U.S. Forest Service's Sawtooth National Recreation Area, approximately 2,300 acres (70,000 trees) have already been treated to mitigate bark beetle hazard. Treatments include the removal of green trees infested with bark beetles, application of pesticides to prevent beetle attacks, and thinning to reduce stand susceptibility to bark beetles. From 2004 to 2006, 32 grants for a total of \$1,363,000 have been awarded to private landowners in Blaine, Custer and Lemhi counties.

This program is a successful tool that is used to educate private landowners on the value of proactive forest management techniques. A private landowner in Smiley Creek (between Ketchum and Stanley), in commenting on the success of this program, said, "This program is a good example of how government can be extremely helpful to its citizens at a local level." A bark-beetle besieged landowner from Stanley was pleased by the professionalism of the Idaho Department of Lands, the U.S. Forest Service and the loggers, who are working to mitigate the bark beetle problems in the subdivision, saying, "We are grateful for all the support provided in 2005 from IDL, the U.S. Forest Service and especially Jim Rineholt. The loggers go to great lengths to work with property owners, (they) are very conscientious about (reducing) destruction of the earth as well as (minimally) destroying healthy trees with their equipment ... the relationship between the loggers and the homeowner groups appear to be

harmonious."

The Idaho Department of Lands and the U.S. Forest Service hope to continue this partnership by helping private landowners use forest management to deal aggressively with the bark beetle problem: tactics that will ensure a future healthy forest for central Idaho.

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