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## Beetles set off alarm

Bugs could cause Hayman-like fires, U.S. senator says

By Jim Erickson, Rocky Mountain News

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FRISCO - The increased wildfire threat created by millions of beetle-killed Colorado pines could be the "Katrina of the West," Sen. Ken Salazar warned about 150 community leaders who gathered in this mountain town Friday.

Forest managers and mountain communities must work together to reduce the fire threat which - if unchecked - could lead to "Hayman-like fires" in the future, the Colorado Democrat told a standing-room-only crowd. He spoke by telephone from Washington, D.C.

Colorado's Hayman Fire of June 2002 burned 137,000 acres and destroyed 133 homes.

The number of Colorado lodgepole pines killed by bark beetles jumped nearly fivefold in 2006 as the explosive, decade-long bug epidemic continued to gain steam.

About 4.8 million lodgepoles were killed this year, up from about 1 million trees last year, U.S. Forest Service entomologists say.

The lodgepole acreage under attack by mountain pine beetles jumped about 50 percent this year to 644,840 acres, up from 430,526 acres last year.

Ground zero is north-central Colorado's mountain forests.

Bark beetles are expected to kill nearly all the large lodgepoles there, and it will take a century for a mature forest to return, said research silviculturist Wayne Shepperd of the U.S. Forest Service.

Salazar sponsored Friday's forum, which brought together local government officials, energy-industry experts and forest managers to explore new ways to use beetle-killed wood removed from Colorado forests in the coming decades.

"This is a long-term issue for all of us," Salazar said. "It's a very, very serious problem."

The goal is to create new markets for the dead wood, so that local economies will benefit while the wildfire threat is lessened, he said.

The Forest Service spends \$25 million to \$30 million annually to thin overly dense stands, remove dead trees, ignite prescribed fires, and perform other "fuel treatments" in Colorado's national forests, Regional Forester Rick Cables said.

Between 75,000 and 100,000 forest acres are treated annually in Colorado.

"We can only touch a fraction of it," Cables said. The preservation efforts are focused on saving mountain communities, ski areas, campgrounds and highly valued scenic areas.

Given federal budget constraints, funding for those projects is unlikely to increase, Cables said.

That's why it's so important to create new markets for beetle-killed trees, he said. That way, more mountain communities will be able to hire contractors to remove beetle-killed timber, "and the value of the material pays the contractor," he said.

One promising approach is to use wood chips from beetle-killed trees to fire boilers that heat municipal buildings.

Hundreds of these "biomass heating systems" have sprung up over the last 30 or 40 years, mostly in the eastern United States, said Randy Hunsberger, a senior energy engineer at McNeil Technologies.

The technology has been creeping westward, and three existing or planned Colorado systems were discussed at Friday's forum.

Boulder County now heats a five-building, 95,000-square-foot county complex with a biomass heating system that uses wood chips from local forest-thinning projects, said Therese Glowacki of the county's parks and open space department.

The system, which cost \$280,000 and burns 650 tons of wood a year, just completed its first year of operation. It is expected to pay for itself - through saved energy costs - in about a decade, Glowacki said.

"There is more interest in this sort of thing than we've ever seen, and the need is huge," said Don Carroll, deputy forest supervisor at the beetle-ravaged White River National Forest. It includes the Vail, Keystone, Arapahoe Basin, Breckenridge, Copper Mountain, Beaver Creek and Aspen ski resorts.

At Friday's meeting, regional forester Cables dismissed the findings of a recent Colorado State University study, which argued that Colorado's beetle epidemics are part of a natural process. The report, written by William Romme and his colleagues, said the widely held belief that massive insect outbreaks set the stage for extreme wildfires "is not well supported and may in fact be incorrect."

Cables said a century of wildfire suppression in national forests, combined with unusually warm, dry weather has created "the best bug habitat the world has ever seen."

"It's not natural, and we need to intervene," he said. "The beetle epidemic is caused by major forces beyond our control. We can no more stop it than we can stop a hurricane.

"And for decades to come, the fire risk in these areas is going to be extremely high," Cables said. "The challenge is to protect critical values like homes, watersheds, roads, power lines and recreation areas."

## New ways to use beetle-killed trees

One promising approach is biomass heating systems - using wood chips to fire boilers that heat buildings.

- **Boulder County** heats a five-building, 95,000-square-foot county complex with wood chips from local forest-thinning projects.

- **Summit County** is about to build a \$2.3 million biomass heating system.

- **Gilpin County** plans to spend \$1.5 million next year on a biomass system. *Sources: Boulder, Summit And Gilpin Counties*

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