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Report paints bleak picture of trees State's pine beetle outbreak highest since at least 1876



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By Joe Hanel | Herald Denver Bureau

DENVER - Aspen and pine trees continued to die in alarming numbers across Colorado last year, according to a new report from the Colorado State Forest Service.

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Read the 2006 Report on the Health of Colorado's Forests: csfs.colostate.edu/

Mountain pine beetles infested 660,000 acres in 2006, up from 500,000 acres in 2005, according to the *Report on the Health of Colorado's Forests*.

Aerial surveys found 138,000 acres of dead aspen trees, about twice as many as last year, said Colorado State Forester Jeff Jahnke. Large pockets of dead aspens are found north of U.S. Highway 160 between Durango and Cortez, and also around Meeker and Craig.

Aspens are not regenerating in the normal way, and scientists don't know why, Jahnke told members of the Legislature's agriculture committees on Wednesday.

Foresters say pine beetle outbreaks are a natural process, but this one has reached a level unprecedented since at least 1876, when Colorado became a state and written records began. A century of firefighting has left dense, old forests - perfect conditions for a beetle outbreak.

"It's a problem because people live in those forests. They recreate in those forests. They expect clean water and wildlife. They expect economic opportunities from the forests," Jahnke said.

Dead trees can sometimes pose a fire risk, and lawmakers want them removed. Foresters are concentrating on populated areas, because there is no way to protect all 22 million acres of forests in Colorado. They rely on logging to fight the beetles.

"There was a time when I believed it was politically unacceptable to cut down a tree in a lot of people's minds," said Rick Cables, the senior U.S. forester in Colorado. "We have a window of opportunity now where folks will allow us to manage the vegetation for whatever people want from the forest."

The potential for wildfires puts towns at risk and, even worse, could damage the state's water supply, Cables said. The worst of the beetle outbreak is at the Colorado River headwaters.

"To just allow nature to take its course is an awfully expensive proposition," Cables said.

The Forest Service has the environmental approval to treat thousands of acres, but it doesn't have the money to start the projects. President Bush is calling for a \$350 million cut in the Forest Service budget next year, out of a \$5 billion budget.



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Firefighting will eat up 45 percent of the Forest Service budget in 2008, compared with just 13 percent in 1991.

As a result, the Forest Service is relying more on partnerships with the state, Cables said. However, funding for state and private forestry has been cut in half the last two years.

That frustrates Sen. Jim Isgar, D-Hesperus.

"If we don't find the money to manage the forests, we will find the money to fight the fires," Isgar said.

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