



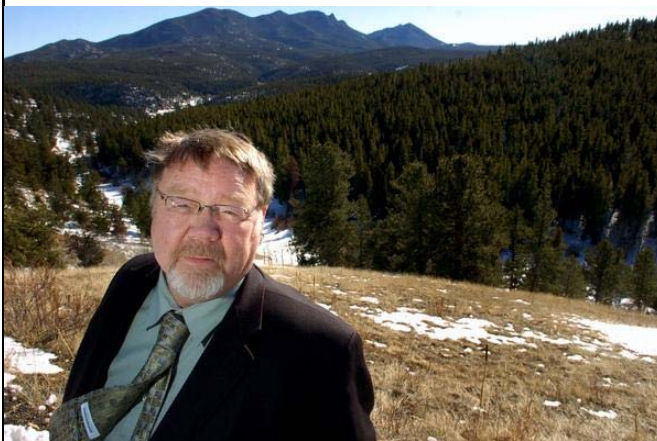
denver and the west

Beetle scourge goes from bad to worse

The beetle infestation that is expected to kill all of Colorado's mature lodgepole pine forest within five years is moving into Wyoming and the Front Range.

By Howard Pankratz
The Denver Post

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Bill Carpenter stands in front of part of the 280-acre parcel he owns in Boulder and Gilpin counties. He expects that in about three years the hills behind him will be completely red from pine beetle infestation. (Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

A pine beetle infestation is spreading from the mountains into southern Wyoming and the Front Range, and all of Colorado's mature lodgepole pine forests will be killed within three to five years, state and federal officials said Monday. The bark beetle infestation ravaged 500,000 new acres of forests in Colorado in 2007, bringing the total infestation to 1.5 million acres — almost all of state's lodgepole forests — according to the latest aerial survey. The infestation has now worked its way north and east, including an increase of more than 1,500 percent in the acreage affected in Boulder and Larimer counties.

"That's a pretty staggering thought," Susan Gray, group leader of Forest Health Management for the U.S. Forest

Pine Beetle

- [Discuss the aerial report showing pine beetles on track to kill half of Colorado's large-diameter lodgepole pine forests in 3-5 years.](#)
- [View a Forest Service map showing pine beetle infestation acreage, since 1996.](#)

Service's Rocky Mountain Region, said of the statewide figures that the official news release called a "catastrophic event." "That is going to have an effect on wildlife habitat, watersheds and everything that is dependent on lodgepole pine forests."

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Bill Crapser, state forester for Wyoming, said that 85 percent to 90 percent of the mature lodgepole pine — about 750,000 acres — will be dead in the Medicine Bow Mountains of southern Wyoming in the next three to five years.

The result of the devastation will be a landscape much like that of Yellowstone National Park after the fires that ravaged the forests there in 1988, said Rick Cables, Rocky Mountain regional forester for the U.S. Forest Service.

The Colorado forest will regenerate, he said, with lodgepole saplings perhaps reaching knee-to-waist height in 10 years.

"Our ultimate goal is to create more resilient forests that thrive under the pressures of our changing climate and ever-evolving human activities and pressures," said Cables. "What we are trying to do is create a diversity of age classes in these forests so that one insect or pathogen cannot destroy an entire forest at once.

"One of the things that is going on in Colorado is our forests are ready to regenerate. They are old. And if you look at the many different species — aspen, spruce, lodgepole — they all have one thing in common. They are old."

The state has 1.7 million acres of lodgepole forests.

The pine beetles have reached "epidemic proportions" on the west side of Rocky Mountain National Park, said spokesperson Kyle Patterson.

"It is an epidemic in the whole area (of northern Colorado), and we are one small part of it," she said.

Evident in Wyoming Like Patterson, Crapser described the infestation as epidemic in the Bridger-Teton Forest of northwest Wyoming and in the Black Hills of northeast Wyoming.

In addition, infestations are now evident on Casper Mountain, near Casper, and in the Big Horn Mountains, in north-central Wyoming, he said.

"We are seeing large populations of not only the mountain pine beetle, but also the spruce bark beetle and the Douglas fir beetle," said Crapser.

The reason for the infestation, according to Jeff Jahnke, Colorado state forester, is an "unprecedented combination of drought, warm winters . . . and poor conditions that have caused an extensive, unprecedented infestation of the beetle."

Gray and Bob Cain, a U.S. Forest Service entomologist, said that a lack of cold winters has allowed pine beetles to thrive.

Not cold enough to kill Cain said that normally in the middle of winter, temperatures need to fall to minus 40 degrees to

kill the bark-residing beetles.

"Those are the temperatures that used to shut

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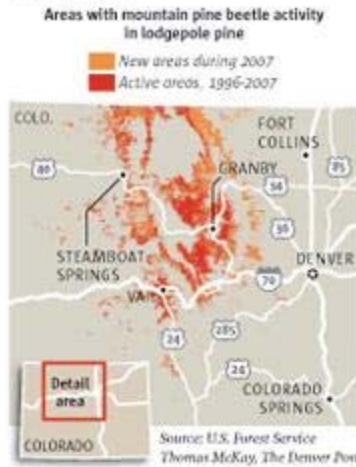
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these outbreaks down," he said. "We used to routinely get into the minus 40s in the mountains. And we just haven't been."

Infestation spreads

The pine beetle infestation in 2007 claimed 500,000 acres of lodgepole pines, bringing the total number of acres to 1.5 million since the first signs of the outbreak in 1996.



(click on image to enlarge)

Ingrid Aguayo, a forest entomologist for the Colorado Forest Service, said the pine beetle, which is native to the state, will migrate to other, less-favored hosts when the mature lodgepole are gone. Mature trees are at least 8 inches in diameter and have thicker inner bark, which the beetles prefer. She anticipated that the remaining beetles could jump to ponderosa, limber and bristlecone pine.

Overall, she said, the number of pine beetles is expected to decline when the current epidemic

has run its course.

A new, more diverse forest should better withstand any beetle infestation caused by a future drought, she added.

Preventing "big" fires Because of the scale of the current beetle infestation, Cables said that the U.S. Forest Service can treat only what he characterized as "strategic acres." He defined those as watersheds, the structures that carry water from the mountains and areas where the service is attempting to prevent "big" forest fires.

"We may be creating fuel breaks by removing trees, so we can stop a fire so it doesn't destroy the forest or so sediment doesn't get into reservoirs," he said.

The dead forests will be susceptible to fires for the next 15 or 20 years.

He said the Forest Service is thinning trees and removing vegetation so it can prevent future fires and create a forest where the remaining trees are healthier because they are not competing for as much water and sunlight.

Such trees, said Cables, are healthier and "can fight off the bugs."

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Tourism may be next to get bitten

The social and economic impacts of dying trees have been seen for years in mountain towns, and now other communities will also face the consequences of pine beetles.

People come to Colorado expecting to see pine-tree-covered slopes, said Tom Clark, Metro Denver Economic Development Corp. executive vice president.

"I think if we don't get serious, this will have an impact on our tourist economy. We have looked at this as a pestilence problem, when in reality it has the potential to become a serious economic problem," Clark said.

Tourism isn't the only sector that could suffer because of the infestation, he said.

The dead trees are a fire hazard. Property owners who want to buy or sell a home have to figure the cost of removing them and replanting the land, Clark said.

Before a home sale in mountain communities, the trees on the property have to be surveyed and the cost of mitigating an infestation determined, said Denise O'Connell, a broker associate at Coldwell Banker Mountain Properties.

Mountain communities and homeowners are working to rid the forest of dead trees and plant new ones, said Bonnie Smith-Allen, the owner of Exclusive Mountain Retreats Real Estate in

Breckenridge.

But she doesn't expect the bugs to have much impact on home sales.

"In the long run, this might be more of a blessing than a curse," she said. "I think there are pockets of people that come from other parts of the country that are alarmed. . . . If you have a responsible Realtor who tells you what is going on, that allays fears."

Trees infested and killed by the tiny bugs have caused costs to pile up.

The town of Frisco, for example, budgeted \$60,000 to deal with the problem in 2005 and \$90,000 the following year.

Last year, it cost the town \$320,000 to cut down dead trees and treat live ones within its borders, said Frisco finance director Bonnie Moinet. Frisco has budgeted \$290,000 for 2008.

In a recreation area that includes the Frisco Nordic Center, the town cut down 2,000 trees.

Where lodgepole pines once stood shoulder to shoulder, "we now have view corridors," Moinet said.

Grand Lake resident Ed Peterson lives in a log-style home surrounded by the stumps of ravaged trees he has cut down to keep the bugs at bay. Since 2006, he has had to cut down more than 400 trees on his 5-acre property.

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"I still love it up here, but I am looking at a house now that I couldn't see at all before the trees were gone," said Peterson, a retired executive who has lived in Grand Lake for 15 years.

Tourists frequently comment on the clusters of dead trees they see as they soar in a balloon near Rocky Mountain National Park, said Jack Castellion, the owner of Grand Adventure Balloon Tours. "It used to be that you could see a few brown spots," he said. "Now you can see a few green spots."

He is concerned that at some point the dead trees could cause some tourists to go elsewhere. But so far, he hasn't noticed any decline in his business.

"It is still a pretty place," he said. "A lot of our tourists come from other parts of the country, so they are not going to know about it until they get here."

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