



Report: stressed Colorado forests need to be managed

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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DENVER - A new state report says many Colorado forests are ailing and need to be more actively managed to protect watersheds, wildlife and the other benefits they offer.

The report released Wednesday by the Colorado State Forest Service echoes concerns recently raised by federal forest managers about the effects of climate change, drought, insect infestations, decades of fire suppression and increasing development.

About 1.5 million acres of lodgepole pines in northern Colorado have been killed by bark beetles and 334,000 acres of aspens are dying or in decline.

"Colorado's forests are on the cusp of dramatic change," according to the report.

State forest officials say Colorado's forests increasingly need to be managed to address the changes. Some of the report's recommendations are to cut trees and use controlled fires to reduce fuels that could cause catastrophic wildfires. Another goal is to grow more diverse, resilient forests by having different ages of trees.

"We can't just leave forests alone and let them take care of themselves," said Jen Chase, assistant staff forester and the report's primary author.

Chase and State Forester Jeff Jahnke presented the report with the Legislature's House Agriculture, Livestock and Natural Resources and the Senate Agriculture, Natural Resources and Energy committees in a joint meeting.

Gov. Bill Ritter recently formed the Colorado Forest Health Advisory Council to coordinate local, state and federal efforts on battling bark beetles, wildfires and other problems.

Chase said about two-thirds of the nearly 23 million acres of forests in Colorado are on federal land.

During the committee meeting, Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, threatened to introduce a resolution calling on the state attorney general to sue the federal government to force the government to pay for upkeep of federal forests.

"The attorney general should look at whether to sue the federal government over lack of funding for forest health," Gardner said.

Rick Cables, U.S. Forest Service forester for the Rocky Mountain region, told lawmakers the federal government has done all it can to halt destruction of the bark beetle, which is ravaging federal forests.

"I don't believe there is anything we could have done that really would have stopped this beetle," he said.

While bark beetle infestations are considered part of natural cycles, the current outbreak is complicated by the growing number of homes in or near forests. That makes the prospect of wildfire roaring through stands of dead trees more urgent.

Drought and warmer-than-normal temperatures are also thought to be worsening the epidemic. Colorado hasn't had prolonged freezing temperatures that would help kill the bugs, and the drought has weakened the trees.