

# THE DURANGO HERALD

## Forest report cites dangers to water source

by Joe Hanel

Herald Denver Bureau

Article Last Updated; Saturday, February 21, 2009

DENVER - Calling Colorado's high-altitude forests a national asset, the region's top forester thinks urban water utilities should consider charging their customers a monthly forest-health fee.

### Many bills, little money to fight wildfires

DENVER – A cadre of state lawmakers is scrounging for low-cost ways to prevent wildfires.

Senate Bill 18 originally began as a \$10 million-a-year grant to communities at high fire risk to thin their forests. But the recession and budget cuts have reduced the money available to \$180,000. The bill is awaiting action in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

The sponsors are Sens. Mike Kopp, R-Littleton, and Dan Gibbs, D-Silverthorne; and Reps. Steve King, R-Grand Junction, and Christine Scanlan, D-Dillon.

Rick Cables, head of the U.S. Forest Service's Rocky Mountain region, told state lawmakers Wednesday that forest protection is every bit as important for water supplies as building dams and pipelines.

"The new water project is protecting the headwaters - investing in where the water comes from," Cables said.

Cables and Colorado State Forester Jeff Jahnke visited the Legislature's two agriculture committees to release the annual forest health report, which this year focuses on threats to high-altitude forests.

Trees above 9,000 feet provide biodiversity and homes for wildlife, Jahnke said.

"Probably more than anything - and I think of national strategic value - is their role in producing water," Jahnke said.

Cables agreed. People in 143 counties in 10 states rely on water from Colorado's headwaters, he said.

The trees collect snow and keep it high on the peaks until the spring melt. But with the climate changing, runoff is arriving 10 days before it used to, Cables said.

"This is really spooky stuff, folks," he said.

Foresters can't stop climate change, but they can try to keep the high-altitude trees healthy and free of bug outbreaks, he said. Cables proposed charging urban water users for the expensive forest thinning projects.

"If we could add 50 cents a month to the water users in Denver ... that generates \$6 million a year to invest in the watershed," Cables said. "And if we get Las Vegas and Phoenix and Los Angeles on board, it could be 10 cents a month, or 5."

Contents copyright ©, the Durango Herald. All rights reserved.

Cables acknowledged the difficult politics of his plan. Although most people approve of cutting trees near populated areas, logging in the high backcountry isn't popular. Many of the high-altitude forests are protected as wilderness or roadless areas, and conservationists often fight plans to build new logging roads into the forest.

The 2009 Forest Health Report, written by the State Forest Service, shows the continuing spread of beetles that are killing millions of mature trees. The worst infestation - mountain pine beetles - has killed 1.9 million acres of trees since 1996. Most of the dead trees are lodgepole pines, but the beetles have jumped east over the Continental Divide into ponderosa pines. Jahnke doesn't know how fast they will spread in the ponderosa.

Spruce beetles also are spreading rapidly, especially in southern Colorado's San Juan and Rio Grande national forests. Beetles have killed 230,000 acres of spruce in the last four years, and the spruce won't grow back as fast as the low-altitude lodgepoles.

Sudden Aspen Decline continues to puzzle foresters. Aspens across the state are dying, although the worst spots are in Southwest Colorado, according to the report.

While many Colorado aspens have reached their 100-year life expectancy, Jahnke is worried that new trees aren't sprouting from the dead ones' roots.

"That's what's got us more concerned than the fact that they're actually dying. They're not regenerating as we thought they would," he said.

Cables urged state lawmakers to take their concerns about the forests to Congress, which controls the Forest Service budget.

State Rep. Scott Tipton, R-Cortez, suggested reaching out beyond the Colorado delegation to California and Arizona.

"It's in their interest to protect Colorado water," Tipton said.

State Sen. Dan Gibbs, D-Silverthorne, is headed to Washington next week to make the case for better beetle-prevention funding. He's worried about a major wildfire in the central mountains.

"I strongly believe Homeland Security needs to be involved with this as well, because it's not a matter of if, but when," Gibbs said.

[jhanel@durangoherald.com](mailto:jhanel@durangoherald.com)