

More water, fewer trees?

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CHEYENNE -- More open spaces and fewer trees can help increase water yields on national forest lands in Wyoming, a U.S. Forest Service official told a state legislative committee Thursday.

But Rocky Mountain Regional Forester Rick Cables said it will be tough to convince the public to support the additional clear-cutting that would be required to increase water yields in Wyoming's forests.

"Water is going to be the defining environmental issue in this country and in the West, and there's a lot of interest in increasing water yields" on forest lands, Cables told members of the Legislature's Joint Agriculture, Public Lands and Water Resources Interim Committee.

Cables said the best way to ensure Wyoming's national forests have clean, abundant water is through a healthy forest watershed that is resilient to threats such as insects, disease and fire. And the best way to ensure a healthy forest watershed in these drought times is to increase the forest's water yield, he said.

"We're trying to get a sense of how much potential may exist in terms of creating additional water," Cables said.

He said Forest Service studies have shown that to get an appreciable gain in water requires a timber clear-cut of about 25 percent -- or one out of four acres -- of the state's forested lands. The new spaces must remain open in perpetuity to be effective, he said.

Some committee members wondered whether the public would sit still for such a significant change in management with that amount of clear-cutting, and they asked what would be the best way to overcome public resistance to the idea.

"We have to educate people ... to try and give the most accurate, honest information about the facts and the reality of the choices before the public," Cables said. "(Let the public know) one choice is 25 percent of the forest being managed in an open condition."

Unmanaged recreation

Rep. Kermit Brown, R-Laramie, urged forest officials to increase their law enforcement efforts to combat the growing problem of unmanaged recreation on forested lands -- specifically off-road vehicle use.

"Lots of my constituents are troubled about this... There's not a place left elk can lie down and relax," Brown said.

"You catch the easy ones, but the real renegades and their quasi-criminal conduct are not being regulated... It's the enforcement component that's missing," he said.

"The Forest Service needs to develop another branch focused on enforcement ... the people you have

are more interested in the science," Brown said. "There's a frustration out there because people see nothing's being done about (illegal off-roaming) and say, 'I'll do it.'"

Cables noted the Forest Service does have a law enforcement branch. "But I can't say in good conscience that we have the resources to do the enforcement that we want to do," he added.

The agency's law enforcement efforts are not keeping up with the growth of off-road vehicle use and increased forest users in general.

Cables said one solution may be "a more efficient sharing of resources" among the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and state agencies such as the Game and Fish Department.

"The more this committee helps these agencies ... to be strong, with personnel on the ground, the more it helps us," he said.

Beetles, burns

Cables said Wyoming and other Western states continue to be plagued by invasive species, including a variety of beetles.

"It's a huge challenge with the bugs and what they're doing to forested lands ... but we are tackling the problem," he said.

Outbreak population levels of mountain pine beetle and western balsam bark beetle resulted in large-scale mortality in 2004 of pines and subalpine fir in areas near Jackson, Pinedale, Cody, Sheridan, Lovell, Ten Sleep, Sundance, Laramie and Yellowstone National Park, according to agency data.

Cables said Douglas-fir beetle and spruce beetle populations were also at outbreak or epidemic levels in many areas of Wyoming.

The beetle population increased dramatically near Jackson Hole, Cody, Dubois, in the western Bighorn Mountains, the Sierra Madre and the Snowy Mountains, agency data show.

He said the majority of the timber, fuels and forest health projects scheduled for 2005 will be conducted in the areas infested by beetles.

Cables also told committee members the Rocky Mountain Region directly treated 110,000 acres in 2004 to reduce fuels build-ups in an effort to prevent forest fires, including 18,000 acres in the Shoshone, Bighorn, Medicine Bow-Routt and Black Hills national forests in Wyoming.

He said the amount is almost twice the average for the previous three years. Treatment methods include prescribed burns, mechanical thinning and wildland fire use.

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