

# ***A disaster waiting to happen***

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BY: VIRGINIA GIORGIS, Pioneer Editor



*Because of pine beetle infestation that is resulting in huge numbers of dead trees, the possibilities of major fires, soil erosion and water contamination are a threat. This photo was taken last fall in the East Fork of the Blacks Fork near the campground and trail head. A meeting was held Wednesday at the Lyman Town Hall to discuss the conditions of forests in the Uinta Mountains. COURTESY PHOTO/Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest*

The devastation of the lodgepole pine on the North Slope of the Uinta Mountains holds promise of catastrophic fires, according to views presented at a meeting Wednesday at the Lyman town hall.

The meeting, organized by Lyman area rancher Carl Larson, brought together a cross-section of people dependent on the health and status of the North Slope area. In addition, there was representation of federal and state officials and entities such as BLM and the Forest Service.

Those at the meeting decided the Uinta County Coalition should spearhead the work to get help with the pine beetle problem in the Uintas and to get better access so the problems can be worked on.

The coalition was formed several years ago and, according to Larson, all citizens of Uinta County are members. The board of directors operates under a set of by-laws and works for the benefit of Uinta County citizens.

At the meeting, Larson cited a 1965 research paper by the Forest Service. The paper stated the age of the trees of the North Slope “is unbalanced and is dominated by overmature stands. More than half of the coniferous forest bears stands that are mature or overmature... the North Slope lodgepole pine has been under intermittent siege by mountain pine beetles for several decades... Forty-four percent of the 201,000 acres of mature and overmature timber is classified as ‘high risk’.”

Another problem, according to Larson, is the attempt by the federal government to redesignate part of the area as roadless. Larson said Uinta County participated in the 2003 Forest Plan revision. At that time, through the county’s influence, the roadless designation was removed.

The decrease of logging in the area and the lack of accessibility have made the pine beetle

infestation even more dangerous. A fire would be uncontrollable, and it would most likely destroy homes, human lives and livestock, and sheep that graze in the area.

Steve Ryberg, forest ranger for Evanston and Mountain View areas, said 80 percent of the trees had been impacted. The pine beetle infestations had affected the area in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1980s. Due to these problems, the Forest Service tried to rearrange its timber sales to alleviate part of the problem. The massive infestation of pine beetles in the last few years has made the problems worse. Additional problems surfaced when timber sales were hit with litigation and suits to stop the sales.

Gaylon Thornock of South and Jones of Evanston said, "If you are thinking of building a cabin in the Meeks Cabin area, think again. If a fire starts, gather your most important pictures and get out of there. Time has almost run out. Now, everybody realizes we have a problem."

In reference to timber sales, Thornock said the value of the trees is affected. However, the trees attacked by the pine beetles are really dry and can be used for supports in coal mines.

Millburne Rancher Dick Hamilton talked about using chainsaws in the wilderness area. He said the trails are difficult and it would be beneficial to improve the trails to provide better access.

Lonetree rancher Joe Hickey said a bug expert had told the Uinta County Coalition several years ago the pine beetles couldn't reproduce in sunlight. The Wadsworth ground at Hickey Mountain abutted the Forest Service ground.

The trees had been thinned on the Wadsworth ground. Pine beetles had infected 10 percent of the trees on the Wadsworth ground, but across the fence, in Forest Service ground, 90 percent of the trees were infected.

Several people commented on the ripple effect of a massive fire, that would also leave the soil prone to erosion and unproductive for years. In addition, the erosion would cause problems with water sources.

Ken Fackrell of Bridger Valley Water Conservancy District said the district had \$150 million invested. He said in the past the fires "had crowned over the trees. It's not a matter of if, but of when. The fire will burn hotter and be uncontrollable." Then, he said, there will be problems with erosion.

This will also affect the local economy, agriculture, and other things.