

Forest Service plans to shift funding toward southern Wyo, northern Colo.

Beetles may drive camp closures

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Dozens of popular camping spots on public land around Yellowstone National Park could be closed next summer as the U.S. Forest Service focuses regional spending priorities on the effects of widespread bark beetle infestations in southern Wyoming and Colorado.

The problem has drawn the attention of Wyoming's congressional delegation, although additional funding from Washington, D.C., is unlikely to provide a short-term solution to what planners say will be an ongoing budget drain.

"There is no easy fix to this problem, but we simply must find ways to empower our land managers to turn the tide in this fight," said Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo.

The Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Region put aside \$49 million in its fiscal year 2010 budget to tackle the beetle-kill "emergency situation," said Cheryl Chatham, acting director of external affairs.

"Our main concern has been the health and safety of the employees and the public," Chatham said. "We're finding a lot more of the dead trees are beginning to fall and it's created quite a concern for us in regard to powerline right of ways, roads, trail access, recreation areas, things of that nature."

The initial budget calls for redirecting funds to areas hit hardest by the beetle epidemic in Colorado's Routt, Arapaho, Roosevelt and White River national forests and in Wyoming's Medicine Bow National Forest.

While the budget covers fixed costs, including permanent employees, it's also putting a crimp on other national forests in the region, which covers parts of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming.

The budget for the Shoshone National Forest in northwest Wyoming would drop from about \$14 million to \$12 million under the change, Forest Supervisor Becky Aus said. She said that includes the possibility of closing 32 campgrounds.

"We don't have a full analysis yet of what all of the implications would be," she said.

Bighorn National Forest supervisor Bill Bass said his budget of \$6 million is down \$500,000 from last year. He said the biggest impact will be on construction, maintenance and seasonal employees. The cuts could also result in campground closures in the Bighorn, as well as decreased services at visitor centers, he said.

Growing emergency

"Our regional forests have been dealing with this for the last three to five years. It's to the point where it's basically an emergency based on community infrastructure at risk," Aus said.

Workers in the Shoshone National Forest will spend extra time next year assessing dead and dying trees in campgrounds, focusing on protecting buildings and infrastructure and ensuring visitor safety, she said.

Based on preliminary budget figures, that could mean serious cutbacks in services, including campground closures and a reduction in trail maintenance, she said, adding that no final decisions have been made at the regional level.

Chatham said the region has submitted its initial budget to the Forest Service in Washington, D.C, and is awaiting word on the final budget in December. Regional officials have made the case for more funding for beetle projects, she said.

"In our response to the (initial allocation), we did make our Washington office aware of the fact that we do have this emergency, that it is of the magnitude of a health and safety concern, as well as the possibility for catastrophic wildfires," she said.

The vast Shoshone forest hosts visitors at dozens of developed campgrounds, including along the trout waters of Worthen Meadows near Lander, beneath the rock formations at Pinnacle Butte near Dubois, along the North Fork of the Shoshone River near Wapiti and among high-country lakes in the Beartooth Mountains.

Closing some of those campgrounds or trails could hurt local businesses that rely on summer tourism, said Claudia Wade, marketing director for the Park County Travel Council.

"It would displace some visitors, and hopefully, they'll be able to find other alternatives locally. But they may go where they can get the kind of experience they're looking for at a cost they can afford," she said.

"This is disturbing, to say the least," said Hillary Eisen, public lands advocate in Cody for the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

Many forest visitors prefer to stay in developed campgrounds, she said, adding that closing them could "severely limit access to the Shoshone National Forest."

"The larger issue is that the Forest Service doesn't have enough funding," Eisen said. "If you devote all your resources to fires and beetle mitigation, what about everything else the Forest Service does?"

Serious infestation

Even a preliminary consideration of potential campground closures is a symptom of how serious the bark beetle infestation is, Lummis said.

"Wyoming's citizens and our local tourism economies depend on and deserve access to our public lands. Protecting this access, including to local campgrounds, is a paramount responsibility of our public land managers," she said.

Lummis said plans call for a congressional hearing on the topic in Wyoming, adding that she is "working with forestry experts to draft legislation to give our forest managers better treatment and prevention tools to beat back this beetle epidemic."

Aus said that forest planners have long known that insects and disease were taking a serious toll, and they have been working on long-term watershed restoration projects that will take years to complete.

"This is not small stuff. This is a landscape change that is bringing all kinds of access, infrastructure and community protection issues," she said.