

Critics hit bill on bark beetles

Barrasso's forest bill claims called 'dishonest.'

*By Noah Brenner
January 2, 2008*

A bill U.S. Sen. John Barrasso claims will "save" Wyoming's forests from bark beetle infestation is drawing skepticism from forest experts who say the measure cannot accomplish the things the senator claims.

The Wyoming Forest and Water-shed Restoration Act of 2007 instructs the Chief of the Forest Service to enter into a cooperative agreement with the state "to allow the State of Wyoming to conduct certain forest and watershed restoration services, and for other purposes."

Those forest and watershed restoration services are defined in the bill as "the treatment of insect-infected trees," "the reduction of hazardous fuels," and "any other activity designed to restore, or improve a forest or watershed (including any fish or wildlife habitat) as determined by the Secretary [of Agriculture]."

In a press release announcing the introduction of the bill, Barrasso touted the bill as a way to curb beetle infestation.

"We have tens of thousands of acres of forests that are being killed by bark beetles," Barrasso said. "We can stem the spread of this infestation and save our forests with quick action. But that kind of response will take coordinated management among all partners – private, state and federal. This legislation can deliver those results."

Jesse Logan, an entomologist who spent 30 years studying bark beetles in the Rocky Mountains as a U.S. Forest Service employee and college professor, said Barrasso's claims aren't true.

"That kind of language is dishonest," Logan said. "That is the best I can say about it."

Logan was the project leader for the Forest Service's Interior West Bark Beetle Project based in southern Colorado for 15 years. Though he retired in 2006, he continues to study the impacts of the beetles on alpine environments from his home in Montana.

"To say he will save thousands of acres of forest with this legislation is not honest," Logan said. "To talk tens of thousands of acres of destruction is not honest and its not fair."

Mountain pine bark beetles are endemic to lower elevation forests in the Rocky Mountain West. Beetles and trees like lodgepole pine have co-existed for thousands of years with beetle infestations periodically increasing, due, in large part to climatic factors.

Trees that are stressed by drought are more susceptible to beetle infestation, and beetles are more successful at reproducing when winters are mild.

Logan said beetle infestations, even ones of epidemic proportions are necessary to renew aging forests and such disturbances are vital for regeneration of species like lodgepole pine.

"We have to be very honest about our objectives," Logan said of any human activity in the forest. "To say forest restoration, let's be clear. The forest has been here far longer than people have been around to manage them."

Logan questioned if Barrasso's goal for the state-federal agreement was really maintaining forest

health.

"We have to be realistic about the goals of management," he said. "I think extraction of resources is a legitimate goal within a sustainable context but be honest about it – don't say it is sustaining the forest when it is really trying to get logs for a mill."

Barrasso's press secretary Greg Keeley did not reply to phone and e-mail requests to explain the senator's claims or clarify the goals of the bill.

Even the forest officials Barrasso would like Wyoming to partner with said the bill cannot, and is not designed to, stop the infestation.

"I was kind of surprised by Senator Barrasso's remarks that we need the bill to eradicate the bark beetle," said Mary Anne Chambers, public affairs officer for the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain region, which includes Colorado and southeastern Wyoming. "That is a common misunderstanding about bark beetles in general. You can't eliminate the bark beetle you can only mitigate the effects of bark beetle."

The only thing proven to actually stop beetle infestations is cold weather, Chambers said.

"We just can't seem to get to that pinpoint we need for killing it off — 10 days of 20 below zero weather in a row," she said.

Nevertheless, Chambers, who called the measure a "good neighbor" bill, said similar agreements between state and federal foresters have been productive in Colorado in helping mitigate the impacts of beetle-killed trees.

In Colorado, the agreements are limited to forest lands that border state or private parcels, however, there is no language in Barrasso's bill that would limit management agreements to adjacent lands.

"It allows us to contract with the state when they are doing work on private property and there are adjoining national forest system lands and would make sense to do something all in one area," she said. "It's not like we are giving control over these lands to state."

The goals of those agreements include protecting forest users from falling dead trees, reducing fuel loads around rural developments, and providing wood products from federal forests – not stemming the beetle infestation.

"As far as our objectives with the bark beetle, we can't stop them and we know that," she said. "But we can remove trees hit by bark beetles to reduce fuel loading in areas, reduce damage on power lines, or make sure no one's car is hit by a falling tree and it makes sense from an ecological standpoint to use that wood that would just stand on the stump and die for other things."

Bridger-Teton Public Affairs Officer Mary Cernicek said she could not comment on pending legislation because of agency policies but confirmed valley forests have been experiencing above normal beetle infestations.

"The Forest is aware of bark beetles and it concerns us in a lot of respects in regards to defensible space and fuel loading," she said, "but we also recognize that it is a natural occurrence and something we can't stop."

The Wyoming Forest and Watershed Restoration Act of 2007 was introduced in the Senate on Dec. 13 and referred to the Senate's Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, of which Barrasso is a member.