

Freudenthal worries scope of problem isn't fully understood

Forest chief gets a look at beetles' destruction

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CODY — As regional managers with the U.S. Forest Service are planning how to spend an additional \$40 million in federal funding to cope with the effects of widespread bark beetle infestations, Gov. Dave Freudenthal on Tuesday met with local and federal officials to highlight the extent of the problem.

Agriculture Undersecretary Harris Sherman, who oversees the Forest Service, got both a bird's-eye view and an on-the-ground earful of bark beetle particulars as he joined Freudenthal on an aerial tour of the Shoshone and Bridger-Teton forests.

"Nationally, the bark beetle issue clearly rises to the top as one of our most important challenges," said Sherman, who was confirmed in October and most recently served as executive director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources.

Aerial tour

Freudenthal, Sherman and Shoshone Forest Supervisor Becky Aus met with Park County commissioners before flying over vast swaths of dead timber near Cody and Dubois. Along with other local Forest Service officials, the group also was scheduled to meet Tuesday with Lincoln County Commissioners in Kemmerer.

Freudenthal said he was pleased to have federal funds and attention for the issue, but he worried that some Western governors and legislators had not yet grasped the magnitude of the problem.

Experts predict that, driven by drought and warmer temperatures, bark beetles and other forest blights will continue killing countless trees for years to come, drastically altering entire landscapes across the intermountain West.

"We have to figure out how to restructure our economy and redo our water management with reservoirs that may or may not work right" in affected areas, Freudenthal said.

Slow-motion disaster

The infestation is amounting to a sort of slow-motion disaster that is unseen by most of the nation, creating an immediate crisis with long-term effects, he said.

Much of the recent focus has been on Colorado and southern Wyoming, where forest managers have said that millions of acres of beetle-killed lodgepole pines are threatening everything from major power transmission corridors to urban water supplies.

But more than 1.1 million acres of affected trees in the Shoshone and Bridger-Teton forests present an equally daunting challenge, Aus said.

While fuel reduction work at the eastern edge of Yellowstone National Park has helped allow for beneficial fires there, beetles and white pine blister rust have killed nearly all the trees in a large area near Dubois, she said.

"I'm really concerned about that piece of country," Aus said. "On the south end of the forest, we've got a long ways to go."

Commissioner Tim French criticized a preliminary plan announced in November to transfer funds from several national forests to help pay for beetle-related work in Colorado.

"Our forest needs to be fully funded. To rob Peter to pay Paul just doesn't make any sense to us locally," he said.

Sherman said that Regional Forester Rick Cables is working on a plan to distribute an additional \$40 million to affected forests, and that beetle infestations are growing in other states.

Additional federal funding and policy changes would be more likely if congressional delegations from intermountain states "got together to make their case nationally that it's a regional issue of major proportion," Sherman said.

Freudenthal said that using state funds might be necessary, and that Wyoming taxpayers should be "willing to participate in some of this, recognizing that these are our business people" relying on forest resources.

Some business and property owners in national forests could be asked to share more of the burden of protecting structures against wildland fires, he said.

"If you're not going to do anything to protect your property, why should we?" he said.

Freudenthal and commissioners encouraged Sherman to relax some forest rules, including those requiring extensive environmental reviews for logging and other fuel reduction work.

Simple measures like allowing volunteers limited use of chain saws in wilderness areas to clear fallen trees from trails "would be huge," said Commissioner Bucky Hall.

"We have to attack this on a landscape scale. Instead of a 2,000-acre project here and a 3,000-acre project there, we have to start looking at 50,000 acres at a time, and addressing each one of those under one environmental impact statement," Sherman said.

"The bottom line is, we have to restore these forests, and it has to be done on a massive scale," he said. "That's where the priorities are in the coming years."

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