

Additional Forest Service funding could avert campground closures

## New help for beetle fight

By JEFF GEARINO - Star-Tribune staff writer - with wire reports | Posted: Wednesday, December 9, 2009 12:15 am |



Dead trees, killed by pine beetles, stand along Wyoming Highway 70 in the Sierra Madre Range west of Encampment in this photo from the past summer. The beetle outbreak is drawing additional U.S. Forest Service resources to the region. (Mark Gocke/Star-Tribune correspondent)

An infusion of \$40 million to combat the effects of widespread beetle infestations in the Rocky Mountains might allow the U.S. Forest Service to avoid closing some campgrounds in Wyoming next summer, officials said.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced Tuesday he has allocated an additional \$40 million to Wyoming and other states to deal with the bark beetle. That could avert plans by the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain region to shift dollars away from campgrounds and other operations toward the beetle fight.

"I would say it's definitely good news," Shoshone National Forest spokeswoman Susan Douglas said.

Shoshone officials said the new federal funding will be used primarily to remove hazardous trees and downed trees in forest campgrounds and around other infrastructure.

Federal officials say the tiny bark beetle is responsible for the destruction of more than 2.5 million acres of pine trees on national forests in the Rocky Mountain Region. In Wyoming, the biggest impact so far is on the Medicine Bow National Forest.

Members of Wyoming's congressional delegation lauded Vilsack's move in a statement issued Tuesday and said they were pleased the agency heeded their advice. Sens. Mike Enzi and John Barrasso and Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo., have been working in recent weeks to secure additional funding to fight bark beetle infestation in hope of keeping Wyoming campgrounds open.

Enzi and Barrasso, along with six other senators, wrote to Vilsack on Nov. 23 requesting the secretary use money already in the Forest Service budget to provide additional resources to the region to combat bark beetle outbreaks.

"While I compliment the secretary for taking steps to increase the attention on the bark beetle epidemic in the West without shifting funds from other legitimate forest uses in the area, this is only the first step," Lummis said.

"I'm pleased Secretary Vilsack responded to our concerns," Barrasso said. "Much work remains, but this is a good first step toward healthier forests in Wyoming."

Officials believe the bark beetle is in epidemic stages across the Rocky Mountains and has resulted in a dramatic increase in the danger of dead trees falling on roads, trails and recreation areas. Additionally, the dead and dying trees increase the risk of fire danger on national forest lands. Officials also fear communities in the beetle-plagued areas could see drops in tourism as a result of the outbreaks.

The black beetles burrow under the bark of pine trees and lay their eggs inside the trees. The larva feeds on the trees, slowly killing the needles and restricting the trees' ability to draw water.

Some Wyoming and Colorado campgrounds were temporarily closed earlier this year because of falling trees resulting from the beetle infestation.

Vilsack said Tuesday the additional \$40 million should help the agency address public safety concerns and forest health needs arising from the millions of acres of dead and dying trees.

"Forest lands play a critical role in providing clean water and a healthier climate for all Americans ... and these funds will help address the growing threat posed by the bark beetle to millions of acres of forests across the western United States," Vilsack said.

"The USDA is committed to protecting and preserving this important resources from pests like the bark beetle," he said.

### **Three states**

Vilsack said the funding will go to the most severely affected states, including Wyoming, Colorado and South Dakota. Included in the total will be \$5 million of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding that the Forest Service has been using to reduce the threat of wildfires.

Additional money will also be directed to other western regions.

Earlier this year, the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Region proposed setting aside about \$50 million in its fiscal year 2010 budget to tackle the beetle kill situation in the region's national forests.

In November, Shoshone National Forest officials said that forest's budget could drop from about \$14 million to \$12 million next year, as the agency refocused its regional spending priorities to combat the problem.

The additional funding announced Tuesday will reduce the need for the Rocky Mountain Region to internally shift money, but Regional Forester Rick Cables said he won't know if money will be reallocated until priorities are set.

Shoshone Forest Supervisor Becky Aus said in a media release that managers are working to determine how to set priorities for tree thinning and other fuel reduction efforts.

"We're working with a preliminary budget at this point, but we are committed to finding ways to provide basic services in recreation areas, and that means ensuring the public has access to campgrounds," she said.

In the meantime, Aus said forest workers are addressing the problem posed by increased risk from falling trees. The agency is focusing first on removing hazard trees in campground areas.

"Our priority is public health and safety ... our goal is to protect people from injury and recreation facilities from damage caused by falling trees," Aus said. "So we're concentrating on places where people congregate, starting with our more popular campgrounds."

Vilsack made the funding announcement during a conference call Tuesday with Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter.

Wyoming applauds Vilsack for working on the issue, but is interested in where the money is coming from and where it will go, said Jonathan Green, spokesman for Gov. Dave Freudenthal.

"It would be a shame if the department robbed Peter to pay Paul," Green said. "And we hope the states have some input into how the money is spent so there is minimal waste."

The group Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics has the same question, said Andy Stahl, the group's executive director. He said the group, which includes current and former Forest Service employees, wonders what trails or facilities won't be maintained because of taxpayer dollars being spent on "removing dead trees from remote areas in the Colorado Rockies."

Stahl is among critics who say the beetle-killed trees aren't the wildfire risk the Forest Service say they are.

While bark beetle infestations are considered part of natural cycles, experts say drought and warmer temperatures are worsening the current outbreak. The region hasn't had prolonged freezing temperatures that would help kill the bugs, and drought has weakened the trees.

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