

The forest will recover

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LANDER -- There's probably no way to thwart an ongoing beetle infestation, which experts say will kill nearly all of Wyoming's mature lodgepole pines within five years.

Scientists, conservationists and U.S. Forest Service officials all seem to agree on this point.

But the Forest Service's plan to selectively log and thin parts of the Medicine Bow National Forest in southern Wyoming -- an operation intended to slow the spread of the pine beetle and protect private property from fire -- is an imprudent response to the epidemic, according to one Wyoming conservation group.

The ongoing beetle infestation throughout the Mountain West, while catastrophic to lodgepole forests, is part of a natural cycle and should be allowed to run its course, according to Duane Short, a spokesman for the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, based in Laramie.

"We would like to see the Forest Service allow this beetle epidemic to take place," Short said. "This has happened time and time again throughout the millennia, before the Forest Service ever existed, and the forests have adapted and fared quite well."

But Aaron Everett, a spokesman for the timber industry's Intermountain Forest Association, said the call for a hands-off approach to the beetle problem lacks foresight.

The Forest Service should manage the problem for the long term, using targeted logging to create more variety in the ages and types of trees present in Wyoming's forests, he said.