

After the Beetles

Colorado Timber Industry Association Perspective

Background

Over the next 10 – 15 years, most of the lodgepole pine in the Colorado High Country will regenerate through a combination of mountain pine beetle, salvage timber sales, and large wildfires. The biggest long-term challenge is how to increase the diversity of the lodgepole stands in the Colorado High Country. That, in turn, will reduce the long-term cycles of mountain pine beetles and fire, as well as the long-term cycles for forest products and forest products companies. Increasing diversity will also benefit overall wildlife habitat.

This isn't a new issue. Regeneration following large-scale fires, clearing and logging in the late 1800s resulted in homogenous stands across large areas of the Forests. In the late 1970s, a fairly significant mountain pine beetle outbreak occurred in the Breckenridge area. The Forest Service implemented several timber sales to salvage dead and dying trees. In the mid-1980s, Forest Service entomologists recommended increasing the diversity of lodgepole stands at the landscape scale. In 1985, the Region 2 Director of Timber, Forest Pest and Cooperative Forest Management approved a detailed analysis that found that only 14% of the lodgepole pine was less than 80 years of age, and called for regeneration of 9,000 acres per decade in the Summit, Grand, and Eagle Counties alone in order to increase diversity and reduce the risks of insects, disease and fire.

The Forest Service fell far short of that recommendation for a variety of reasons. Forest management declined sharply beginning in the mid-1980s. In 1989, the Forest Service proposed to eliminate timber sale programs on the White River and Arapaho Roosevelt NFs as part of a national strategy to address below cost timber sales. Even though Congress rejected the proposal, the Forest Service proceeded to virtually eliminate the timber sale programs on those Forests anyhow. In the 1990s, environmental special interest groups challenged most timber sale projects on all 3 Forests over issues like old growth forests, biodiversity, roadless areas, effects on wildlife, etc.

Forest plan revisions were completed for the Routt and Arapaho Roosevelt NFs in the late 1990s, during a period of above average precipitation and below average fire activity and low mountain pine beetle infestation. Even though there was some discussion in the forest plan revision documents about risk of fire and mountain pine beetle epidemics, the forest plans did not seriously consider landscape diversity. In fact, both Forests plans projected that the percentage of mature and old growth stands would increase significantly as the revised forest plans were implemented over the next 50 years.

The Arapaho Roosevelt, Routt and White River NFs have a combined acreage of 4,734,660, of which 970,000 acres, or about 20%, have been designated as suited timberlands (suited timberlands are those lands where timber production is established as a multiple use objective in the forest plan). 2005 timber harvest acres for the 3 Forests combined totaled approximately 1,500 acres, or .15% of the suited timberlands.

Challenges ahead include the low amount of suited timberlands, large acreages of roadless areas with limited access, risk of using prescribed fire on the necessary scale as well as smoke impacts from prescribed fire, proposed Forest Service direction for lynx habitat, and the costs of implementing necessary treatments.

CTIA Objectives

Priority objectives in the view of the Colorado Timber Industry Association for responding to mountain pine beetle epidemic should be:

- regenerate the suited timberlands
- reduce fire risks adjacent to private land
- implement strategically located firebreaks

Pre-commercial thinning

Lodgepole pine regenerates prolifically, often with thousands or tens of thousands of seedlings per acre. Growth of lodgepole pine is heavily affected by stand density; the higher the number of trees per acre, the more competition there is for nutrients, water and sunlight between the trees, and the more likely that individual trees will shorter and smaller in diameter. Foresters typically prescribe pre-commercial thinning of overstocked lodgepole pine stands when the stand is between 10 and 20 years old to a spacing of 12 to 15 feet, or 200 to 300 trees per acre. Pre-commercial thinning in lodgepole pine is only effective if done at an early age. Pre-commercial thinning will generally reduce mortality, allow a larger number of trees to reach a merchantable size, increase average tree diameters, increase live crown ratios, and extend the life of the stand. Without early pre-commercial thinning, the stands will often remain a tightly crowded stand of small diameter size trees. With timely pre-commercial thinning, the new trees should be 8" to 12" in diameter and 40' to 60' tall in 80 years.

Throughout the area of the mountain pine beetle epidemic are regenerated clearcuts that were harvested in the 1980s. The next step for these stands is pre-commercial thinning. **However**, the Forest Service is not doing the pre-commercial thinning, because the Forest Service and US Fish and Wildlife Service have concluded that pre-commercial might detrimentally affect habitat for snowshoe hares, which are a primary prey species for lynx, which is listed as *threatened* under the Endangered Species Act. According to the Forest Service's own projections, eliminating pre-commercial thinning would result in "an 89% reduction of production of sawlog-sized material over the next 60 years", which will make it very, very unlikely that the Colorado High Country national forest lands will ever again support a timber sale program or a forest products industry.

Even though lynx are at the periphery of their range in Colorado, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposal for critical habitat does not include any land anywhere in Colorado, the Forest Service is plowing ahead with plans to manage every acre of national forest land where a lynx could live, as lynx habitat. 100% of the suited timberlands on the Routt and Arapaho Roosevelt National Forests have been designated as Lynx Analysis Units, and the Forest Service does not plan to implement pre-commercial thinning on any of those lands. Think about it - there will be tens or hundreds of thousands of acres of lodgepole pine regeneration over the next 10 to 20 years in the Colorado High Country, and the Forest Service plans to walk away from any future management.

Forest Products Companies' Capabilities

Several Forest Service staff have made comments suggesting that a lack of forest products industry infrastructure in the Colorado High Country has limited their ability to respond to the mountain pine beetle epidemic. That's simply not accurate.

The following table lists the companies which source a major portion of their timber from north central Colorado and southern Wyoming, with their estimated level of current operations. The table also displays the estimated potential capacity for those mills, plus the mill at Saratoga, WY. Achieving those potential operating levels is primarily contingent on procuring adequate timber supplies.

<u>Company</u>	<u>Current level of operations</u>	<u>Capacity</u>
Bighorn Lumber	15 MMbf	30 MMbf
Intermountain Res-Montrose	42 MMbf	90 MMbf
Joe Pittington Leasing	5 MMbf	5 MMbf
Kent Hester Log & Lumber	1 MMbf	3 MMbf
Intermountain Res-Saratoga	NA	90 MMbf
Total	63 MMbf	218 MMbf

For comparison purposes, all the national forests in Colorado combined sold a total of 45 MMbf of sawtimber in FY 2005.

Bottom line, there is no evidence to suggest that the capacity of forest products companies has been a limiting factor in the Forest Service's response to the current mountain pine beetle epidemic. On the other hand, there do appear to be significant opportunities for forest products companies to expand operations, contingent on increased timber sales volume from the national forests.

Salvaging trees that have been killed by mountain pine beetles is an important step toward regenerating "the next forest" and reducing the risk of catastrophic fires. The faster the Forest Service can sell these sales, the higher the utilization, the higher the receipts to the Forest Service, the faster fire risk can be reduced, the faster stands can be regenerated, and the higher the community support for the Forest Service's efforts.

Legislation

Several members of the Colorado delegation have introduced legislation to address the mountain pine beetle epidemic. They have spent a lot of time and energy drafting those bills, and hopefully they can get together behind a single piece of legislation. It won't be easy to pass a piece of legislation specific to Colorado, and so our suggestion is that they review the various pieces of legislation in light of HR 4200, the Forest Emergency Restoration and Research Act, which has already passed the House of Representatives, and explore Colorado-specific amendments to that bill and support its final passage by Congress.

Funding

The other Congressional issue is funding. FY 2007 starts on October 1, but Congress isn't expected to pass the Appropriations bill with Forest Service funding until after the November elections. From the preliminary information, though, the Forest Service Washington Office does not plan any significant increase to the Forest Service in Colorado to increase their response to the mountain pine beetle epidemic. In fact, the Forest Service Washington Office has proposed a reduction in timber sale funds to the Rocky Mountain Region, which includes the Colorado High Country mountain pine beetle epidemic despite the tremendous efforts by many folks in this room, as well as the Colorado Congressional delegation.

According to Regional Office staff, the "mountain pine beetle forests" have completed NEPA decisions for 135 MMbf, but expect to sell only about 40% of that volume in FY 2007 due to projected funding shortfall. What the Forest Service needs to do is sell the entire 135 MMbf that's has completed NEPA in FY 2007 from the mountain pine beetle forests. Accomplishing this will require a combination of additional funding, additional staff on at least a temporary basis, streamlining sale preparation procedures, utilizing multiple funding sources, and reducing costs.

