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NEWS

For Immediate Release

August 17, 2010

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Hinsdale County Community Prepares for Potential Spruce Beetle Invasion

LAKE CITY, Colo. – A mountain community in southwest Colorado’s Hinsdale County has taken vigorous steps to prepare for the potential invasion of the spruce beetle into surrounding forests. Spruce beetles have already impacted more than 400,000 acres in Colorado since the outbreak began in 2003. The beetles are concentrated in the high-elevation Engelmann spruce forests of the upper Rio Grande Basin, where aerial survey flights last month provided evidence of significant further spread of the beetle.

Jeff Burns, Alamosa District Forester for the Colorado State Forest Service, said the Ptarmigan Meadows subdivision south of Lake City recently became concerned about the rapid spread of the beetles from the nearby Weminuche Wilderness. In a July CSFS meeting with residents of the Ptarmigan Meadows Homeowners Association, Burns said the approximately 60 residents in attendance were one vote short of unanimous agreement to establish a community policy to improve the health of the surrounding forest and help fortify it against beetle attacks.

Five days later, residents signed a contract with the CSFS that will allow them to create an open public burn area. By providing a location to dispose of cut wood, the burn area provides incentive for the landowners to remove fallen trees and thin dense stands, which will improve forest health and reduce potential fuels for wildfire. The Ptarmigan Meadows plan also includes strategies to create defensible space around homes in the community to address fire danger.

“It all happened so fast,” Burns said. “I was very impressed at how quickly the community decided to take action.”

Burns said areas around Creede and South Fork, nestled in the Rio Grande National Forest, have also become a spruce beetle concern. He and CSFS Gunnison District Forester Tim Cudmore, who participates in aerial survey flights to monitor insect and disease conditions, have been meeting with communities in these areas to create awareness and discuss the situation.

“Spruce beetle outbreaks tend to happen in remote, high-elevation forests and don’t get as much public attention as mountain pine beetles,” Cudmore said. “But this is a very serious issue.”

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According to Bill Ciesla, aerial forest health survey coordinator for the CSFS, spruce beetles have now killed nearly 100 percent of the trees in most mature Engelmann spruce stands in the San Juan Mountains of southern Hinsdale and Mineral counties. He says the beetles are continuing their expansion, primarily to the east toward Rio Grande County.

“These infestations are now so intense that even krumholz at the edge of timberline are being killed,” Ciesla said, referring to the stunted alpine trees not typically infested by spruce beetles. “I would consider spruce beetles number two in destructive potential, behind mountain pine beetles.”

Ciesla said that in this summer’s joint CSFS-U.S. Forest Service flights he also observed several new areas of spruce blowdown in the Weminuche Wilderness. Blowdowns provide ideal habitat for spruce beetles, allowing populations to expand and move on to infest standing trees. Ciesla says there is a large area of pure spruce forest in the Lake City area that is at risk for future infestation, and warns that the insect is also building rapidly in high-elevation forests between Wolf Creek Pass and South Fork, west of U.S. 160. He points out that spruce beetle populations typically collapse after depleting host trees, and usually are unsuccessful at severely impacting young, vigorous trees.

“In some areas, spruce beetle has run its course,” Ciesla said. “But in other areas, it's just getting started.”

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