

Beetle-ravaged pine trees create piles of problems

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Winter Park - Trying to combat the mountain-pine beetle that has ravaged forests throughout the mountains, Priscilla Ledbury cut down 130 dying lodgepole pines surrounding her Silverthorne home.

Her heartache over that decision has since turned to exasperation.

"Now the problem is to get rid of them. I can't find anyone who will take them," she told a gathering of public officials, timber-industry representatives and homeowners convened Wednesday by U.S. Rep. Mark Udall, an Eldorado Springs Democrat.

Ledbury described just one of the many difficulties in dealing with an "epidemic" outbreak of the native beetle that bores under the bark of lodgepole pine and lays eggs that become fiber-eating larvae.

Public officials fear the stands of dead trees that have spread like a rash across the West could lead to catastrophic wildfires; property owners cringe at the loss of the woods around their homes; environmentalists fear wide-scale logging that will take even healthy trees and leave a network of roads; and logging companies contend that the dead trees have little value and aren't worth cutting.

Solutions are not easy - or cheap.

Winter Park Resort spent \$440,000 this summer cutting infested trees and removing them with a helicopter.

Property owners such as Ledbury are being forced to pay for tree spraying before infestation and cutting and removal afterward, but the expense of removing relatively small numbers of trees and the difficulties of reaching them with large logging trucks make such efforts prohibitively expensive.

Cumbersome laws have slowed government efforts: state Senate President Joan Fitz-Gerald, D-Jefferson County, suggested tapping into TABOR's emergency reserve to pay for preventive logging rather than waiting to use it after a fire.

Udall said that recent federal court rulings have made it difficult to grant waivers of environmental reviews to allow for quick action on new outbreaks.

He said he is considering legislation that would change the 2003 Healthy Forest Initiative to address clearing beetle-killed trees. Authorizing governors to declare emergencies because of beetle kill, potentially involving the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and securing federal funding for "community protection plans" are other possibilities, Udall said.

"It's clear that it's going to take a combination of various stakeholders - federal government, state government, local governments, private sector, neighborhood associations. And the more resources we can bring to the table, we can match, we create momentum," he said.

Timber representatives, meanwhile, told how years of public and political whims about logging - and the resulting uncertain supply - have led to the closure of most of the mills in Colorado, leaving the state without the infrastructure to process beetle-killed trees.

"The majority of the public has spent the past 20 years trying to put me out of business, and the past five years trying to work me to death," said Mark Morgan of Morgan Timber in Fort Collins. Forest managers are promoting a number of logging projects across Colorado as a way to head off infestations, under the theory that by thinning the trees, the remainder will regain the vigor needed to repel the beetles.

But a study released Wednesday by a Portland, Ore., environmental group finds that logging and thinning projects are ineffective in controlling beetle outbreaks.

"A review of over 300 papers on the subject reveals that logging is not the solution to forest insect outbreaks and in the long run could increase the likelihood of epidemics," said Scott Hoffman Black, executive director of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation and author of the report.

From his office at Colorado State University, forestry professor Bill Romme offers a less-startling view of the outbreak. "The implications are not that grim at present," he said. "All these dense forests will become less-dense forests.

"There may be fires, but that is natural. In that sense it's not all that alarming."

Staff writer Theo Stein contributed to this report.