

Beetle project near Aspen a success

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ASPEN – Efforts to slow the spread of mountain pine beetles on Smuggler Mountain near Aspen last summer were successful, according to the research entomologist who analyzed the data from the experiment.

Whether the \$110,000 project bears repeating on Smuggler or elsewhere is up to local governments to decide.

For the Forest, a local nonprofit that was a partner in the project, is willing to help fund a second year of work on Smuggler, said John Bennett, the group's executive director, during closing remarks at a forest health symposium held Thursday in Aspen.

Last summer, For the Forest, the city of Aspen and Pitkin County teamed up to fund the removal of 202 lodgepole pines infested with beetle larvae, followed by the application of a pheromone that fools adult beetles into leaving healthy trees alone.

Nearby stands on Smuggler where nothing was done saw an attack rate by the beetles that was six times higher than in the project area, according to Nancy Gillette, principal research entomologist with the U.S. Forest Service's Southwest Research Station.

“It worked,” she summed up succinctly.

Still to be done is an analysis of wind-direction data that will help researchers determine whether the insects moved from the Smuggler project area into adjacent stands, but Gillette said it appears that did not occur. Where treated and untreated stands bordered each other, the attack rate in the untreated stands weren't noticeably higher right across the border, she said.

Insects forced to move on may have depleted their reserves with all the flying about and failed to reproduce in other, unprotected trees at all, she theorized.

Gillette also pegged tree species diversity as a factor that helps a forest fight the beetle, and said less dense stands – where tree health is better – helped lodgepoles ward off the insects.

Thinning trees would be a logical first step to help slow the spread of beetles, she said.

“We know that pheromone treatments give you an added edge,” she said.

Removal of the brood trees, she added, was a key piece. The project would not have been nearly as effective without that step, according to Gillette.

Removal of the trees, however, was not cheap. They were cut and then hauled to a central site on the mountain with use of a helicopter. There, they were trimmed and then trucked off the mountain.

The experiment took place on about 130 acres of open space owned by the city and county on Smuggler, as well as on adjacent private property. Adjacent land within the national forest that was not treated was used for the comparison.

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