

Forest Service Must Act to Save Spruce Forests

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Frequent travelers on Interstate 70 through the Colorado mountains have become inured to the specter of lodgepole pines turned red by the invasion of the bark beetle.

The disturbing picture of the red death of the lodgepoles is now frighteningly close to the Grand Valley.

A U.S. Forest Service report last week made it clear that another kind of beetle, the spruce beetle, is sharpening its tiny mandibles for the spruce trees on the Grand Mesa and on other lands in the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison national forests.

"I'd say that 20 to 30 percent is showing some kind of spruce-beetle activity," forester Carmine Lockwood said of the 746,000 acres of spruce that fit the bill for the beetles' particular appetites.

Lockwood is the renewable-resources staff officer for the three forests, which are administered from a single headquarters in Delta.

This coming summer likely will tell the immediate tale for the spruce, Lockwood said.

Even if Lockwood's low-side estimate that 20 percent of the forest is infested by the beetle, that means the insect has a significant foothold that can only grow and grow rapidly.

Those 646,000 acres represent a dense, mature forest, exactly the kind of trees favored by the spruce beetle.

We hope the Forest Service takes maximum opportunity to preserve the spruce forest of western Colorado, whether that means careful harvesting of trees already killed by the bug, as well as trees adjacent to those affected areas, or individual trees or stands deemed to be in danger of infestation.

The Forest Service also should continue, as it has done in recent years, to allow fire to perform its natural function on the mesa.

The Forest Service in 2008 let the Coal Creek and Kannah Creek basin fires burn, saving thousands of dollars in firefighting costs and ultimately aiding the natural growth of the forest.

How much can be done to preserve the Grand Mesa forest and the watersheds and habitat it nourishes could well be limited because of the beetles' rapid advance.

Still, much depends on the way the mesa's spruce forest is handled, from tourism to water quality.

The image of reddened lodgepole along Interstate 70 and near some of the world's most famous resorts makes the danger clear.

The spruce forest needs strong management lest it be damaged beyond recognition for the next several decades.