

Will the beetle battle hurt other Forest Service programs? « Summit County Citizens Voice



The U.S. Forest Service has cleared beetle-killed trees from the Old Dillon Reservoir trailhead parking area, but trails just a few yards from the parking lot are still surrounded by dead trees that could fall over at any moment. How far can the agency go to reduce the danger to hikers? PHOTO BY BOB BERWYN.

Regional forester Rick Cables acknowledges concerns, but says \$30 million cash infusion will enable the agency to maintain funding and staff for wilderness, recreation and wildlife programs at existing levels

By Bob Berwyn

SUMMIT COUNTY — A big push by the U.S. Forest Service to try and clear a sea of beetle-killed trees from campgrounds, trail heads and other developed sites could have unintended consequences for the agency and the public lands it manages.

Some local public land stewardship and advocacy groups are concerned that focus on hazard trees could divert resources from other programs that are already short of funds and staff, including wilderness and recreation management.

“My personal opinion is that it’s going to affect other areas, maybe to the point where the visitor experience is affected,” said Currie Craven, who serves on the boards of the Friends of the Eagles Nest Wilderness and the Friends of the Dillon Ranger District.

For now, the Forest Service can’t say exactly how the shift in priorities will affect other programs. But regional forester Rick Cables is hopeful the agency will be able to deliver services on level comparable to the past few years. Get more information at the Forest Service bark beetle web site and see the end of this

post, where the agency's 2007-20011 bark beetle plan is posted in a Scribd.com window.

“The good news is, we got \$30 million more as a region,” Cables said, acknowledging that, prior to last year's allocation of extra funds, the Forest Service had been looking at a “drastic re-allocation” of resources to address the public health and safety issues posed by beetle-killed trees.

Some of the concerns expressed through back channels by Forest Service employees may have pre-dated the extra infusion of cash.

“Because it was announced in December, it pushed back our planning horizon ... I know there is some concern out there, but we think we'll be able to deliver the similar resources for wilderness, recreation and habitat work as we have in the past few years,” Cables said. “At the same time, we have took at an all-hands-on-deck approach to deal with this,” he said, adding that it's not just hazard tree removal, but also fuels reduction work to protect neighborhoods from wildfire.

“We may have to ramp up our volunteer programs even more, and I know that's causing some consternation,” he said, singling out the Friends of the Dillon Ranger District for its work in helping the agency provide some of the crucial wilderness and recreation services to the public. “We may be leaning on them even more,” he added.

Both local groups are in the early stages of organizing volunteer trail work and outreach programs for the summer, and they're anxious to know whether the Forest Service will have the resources to fulfill its end of the partnerships with the groups. Of particular concern to Craven is whether the Dillon District will be able to meeting staffing needs to keep its wilderness program up to snuff.

The agency isn't legally required to have an on-the-ground presence in designated wilderness areas, but it does have an obligation to manage those lands to a certain level, including oft-neglected requirements for monitoring the condition of wilderness lands.

Situated near the heavily traveled I-70 corridor, and with easy access from Summit County, the Eagles Nest Wilderness experiences intense summer use. Some of the popular and easily accessible areas — Boulder Lake and the Cataract Creek drainage, for example — call out for frequent ranger patrols.

Although the local volunteer groups have stepped up their programs in recent years, those volunteer efforts can't completely replace ranger presence, Craven said. Education and outreach are a big part of the equation, but the other critical piece is enforcement, which can't be addressed by volunteers.

“We're certainly going to have to keep up our presence in that area,” Cables said.

What to cut?

The Forest Service is also trying to fine-tune its strategy for removing hazardous trees. A national team set up to plan a strategy is trying to determine just how far rangers will go to reduce the hazard to hikers, cyclists, campers and other public land users.

Removing pines looming over camp sites and trail head parking areas is one thing, but there are thousands of miles of trails and roads that are also vulnerable to falling trees.

“We hope to get an update on the strategy from the national incident management team by mid-March,”

Cables said. “As part of that, we’ll have to wrestle with the question of, what areas do we keep open, where do we allow people,” Cables said. “The bigger question is the backcountry. How are we going to deal with that,” he added.

For the Forest Service, it’s an emergency situation, as the trees present an imminent and deadly threat to people on the national forests. But Andy Stahl, director of the [Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics](#), a watchdog and whistleblower protection group, said the agency must be careful not to create a false expectation of safety among users.

As Stahl explains it, the Forest Service currently enjoys “sovereign immunity” from civil lawsuits relating to natural hazards, under the premise that people assume a certain level of risk when they are on public lands. [Read more about hazard trees and sovereign immunity in this Forest Service handbook.](#)

The same holds true for other risks, including backcountry avalanches. Some people have tried to sue the Forest Service for letting people go into the backcountry from access points at ski areas, where they subsequently died. So far, courts have not been inclined to hold the agency liable in those circumstances.

“But what if the government adopts a rule saying, ‘We’re going to make it safe,’ and they don’t,” Stahl said, expressing concern that the Rocky Mountain region is heading down a slippery legal slope.

Cables acknowledged that the agency has to grapple with those questions as it plans its strategy, but said that public safety is the highest priority.

It’s clear that the main focus will be on developed sites, like campgrounds, developed trail heads or other places where the agency charges a fee, said Pat Thrasher, spokesman for the White River National Forest.

Those are settings where the public might reasonably have some expectation of safety. But once you leave those areas and head on to what Thrasher called “general national forest lands,” it’s a different ballgame, especially in “Capital W” wilderness areas, he added.

But that still leaves some gray areas, as anyone who has camped in National Forest campground knows. What about kids playing across a stream, just outside a campsite, or people cycling on the recpath between Frisco and Copper Mountain? By now, nearly every mile of trail in Summit County is under the threat of falling dead trees. How far will the Forest Service go to put up signs warning of potential dangers?

For now, the Forest Service doesn’t have the answers to all the questions, but education and outreach will play a big role as the summer recreation season approaches, Thrasher said.



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