

Montana Seeks Advice from Colorado on Beetles

The Mountain Pine Beetle that has infected approximately 1.5 million acres of high altitude, Lodgepole pine forests in Colorado is beginning to make its presence known in the State of Montana. On June 5, 2008 the Montana Department of Natural Resources and conservation, in conjunction with Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer and the University of Montana, hosted a one day meeting in Missoula called the "Red Tree Symposium". Nearly one hundred fifty Montanans attended the meeting to discuss what to do about the current Mountain Pine Beetle outbreak that has infected approximately 700,000 acres of Lodgepole Pine and White Bark Pines in the Treasure State. Rob Ethridge, Chief of Montana's Service Forestry Bureau estimates that Montana is about three to four years behind Colorado in the beetle outbreak.

NWCCOG Executive Director Gary Severson and Colorado State Senator Dan Gibbs were invited to be guest speakers at the symposium. Severson was asked to give a presentation on the impacts of beetles on local communities and the formation of the Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative. Senator Gibbs was asked to give a presentation regarding Colorado's legislative response to the bark beetle.

Severson told the audience that, "If you wait for the federal government to come riding over the hill to rescue you, you will get what you deserve." Severson's comment received a round of applause. He went on to say that, "You cannot afford to get caught up in the blame game because it will produce nothing positive. If anything is going to happen, you are the ones who will have to make it happen from the grassroots up. Do not wait; begin building your collaborative associations now and make sure you include the US Forest Service in that collaborative. It is vitally important to maintain positive attitudes with a strong dose of humor."

Gibbs told the audience that, "Bark beetles are a non-partisan issue and must be addressed in the spirit of bipartisanship for the good of all of Montana." Senator Gibbs went on to outline the creative thinking that is embodied in the legislation that has become law in the state of Colorado. Gibbs added, "To address an issue as large as the bark beetle, it takes approaches from a variety of directions."

Governor Schweitzer suggested that instead of spending \$50 million to \$200 million annually to fight wildfires, the state should budget \$75 million each year for treating its forests before they are burned or killed by beetles. But, he added, that won't do much good unless federal land managers become better neighbors and also treat their acreage.

"We propose the federal government manage like we do after a fire - complete timber sales in six to eight months after a fire," Schweitzer said. "When we have dead or dying trees, we harvest them, but our neighbor [the federal government] doesn't do a dang thing, in their checkerboard fashion."

"The bottom line is that perhaps - perhaps - we have proposed to the federal government to let the state manage 10 percent of their timber land." He theorized that would involve about 800,000 acres of the 8 million acres of National Forest and Bureau of Land Management property in Montana.

Mary Sexton, the Director of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation told Severson and Gibbs after the conference, "Your presentations provided us with a look at what can be done and gave us hope." She requested that Severson and Gibbs be available to continue to provide advice as Montana moves forward.