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Trees reach end of useful life

Commercial salvage of beetle kill nearing end

Rowan Jones
Special to the Times

The spruce beetle epidemic has now impacted an estimated 349,000 acres across the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests (GMUG). But the Gunnison Ranger District is about to embark on a transition of sorts — changing its focus from salvaging trees killed by the pest for the purpose of harvesting useable wood, to protecting watersheds and community through fuel management.

GMUG officials consulted scientists and local forests users three years ago to create the Spruce Beetle Epidemic and Aspen Decline Management Response (SBEADMR).

In a record of decision published in July 2016, the GMUG identified 190,014 acres of priority treatment areas. Out of that total, 112,768 acres were identified as suitable for commercial treatment, and the remaining 77,246 acres were designated for non-commercial treatment.

A cap of 60,000 acres for both non-commercial and commercial treatment was implemented, bringing the total allowed treatment area to 120,000 acres.

Yet, after three years, the SBEADMR process has sal-

vaged just 12,633 acres from the GMUG for commercial use.

"There is a commercial life of five to seven years," said Clay Speas, resource staff officer for the GMUG.

That life is beginning to see its end as spruce tree bark falls to the forest floor, creating cracks in the timber and making it unsellable.

Yet, salvage operations are still underway on the Alpine Plateau and active timber sales are occurring in the southern portion of the Gunnison Ranger District.

Gunnison District Ranger Matt McCombs said that the transition is expected to occur sometime after the completion of planning for the Taylor Park Vegetation Management Project — an effort to treat Engelmann spruce and lodgepole pine stands.

"In general there is a transition away from a salvage harvest focus into those resiliency treatments to try to get ahead of the epidemic as it continues to spread northward from its origins on the Rio Grande," said McCombs.

Trying to prevent further outbreak is one of the major focuses for the GMUG, Speas said. As far as the removal impacted trees?

"We've treated what we could," Speas said.

Speas said that even though GMUG was unable to reach its commercial treatment maximum, local forests still benefited. He noted that the SBEADMR process has improved 8,000 acres of wildlife

habitat, has been able to treat 800 acres of noxious weeds and improved safety along corridors of more than 100 roads.

In the eyes of Norm Birtcher, a resource forester for Montrose Forest Products, another benefit of SBEADMR is that it has allowed the public to review the research and planning process.

"It provides a disaster vehicle to meet problems," Birtcher said of an approach that likely will have to be used again in the future.

Montrose Forest Products purchased affected timber and was also a part of the Acting Management Group that oversaw the SBEADMR process. The company has subcontracted with smaller logging companies to salvage infected timber.

One thing that slowed down the salvaging process, Birtcher said, was the scope of the epidemic.

"It was a forest-wide epidemic," Birtcher said. "It took (the Forest Service) much longer to process environmental assessments."

Sites had to be environmentally assessed by the Forest Service before loggers were able to salvage the wood — a time-consuming process for an agency often deemed underfunded.

In a comment uncharacteristic for a timber industry specialist, Birtcher said that the Forest Service was able to effectively utilize what they could. Their budget, which was determined by Congress, Birtcher said, was a limiting factor in the agency's ability.

CPW selects new manager for state's Southwest Region

Longtime agency employee Chick takes reins



Chick

Cory Chick, a longtime employee of Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), has been named the new regional manager for the agency's Southwest Region. The area includes offices in Durango, Montrose, Monte Vista and Gunnison.

Chick's experience with CPW is varied and includes previous leadership positions. He started working for the agency in the late 1990s after serving for six years in the U.S. Marine Corps. His first job was working as a temporary employee in the aquatics section in the San Luis Valley. While working there, he

also earned a degree in biology with an emphasis on wildlife from Adams State University in Alamosa.

Following college graduation in 2004, he was selected for CPW's wildlife officer academy and became a district wildlife

manager, beginning work on the eastern plains in Cheyenne Wells and then Lamar. In 2010, he was named the area wildlife manager in Colorado Springs where he served for more than three years.

Next, Chick spent two years as the area wildlife manager in Brush in northeast Colorado. Most recently, Chick was based at CPW's Denver headquarters as the manager for the license, passes and reservation section.

"I am honored to be selected for this position and I look forward to working with the staff and all CPW's partners and constituents in the region," Chick said.

Originally from Texas, Chick will move to the Durango area with his wife and two young children. The previous regional manager, Patt Dorsey, retired in February.

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