

Southern Forest Insect Work Conference

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Dale Bosworth, Chief, Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Sidney R. Yates Federal Building
201 14th Street, SW at Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Chief Bosworth:

The Southern Forest Insect Work Conference (SFIWC) is a professional group of state, federal, and university forest entomologists from the southeastern United States. Our membership has serious concerns about the number and size of expanding southern pine beetle (SPB) infestations on federal lands. Recent epidemics of the southern pine beetle have caused inordinate and devastating impacts on the forests of Tennessee, Florida, Alabama, North Carolina, Georgia and Kentucky, and current outbreaks are killing large numbers of pines in South Carolina and Mississippi. When infestations are left untreated, they can move through pine stands like wildfire.

As with wildfire, the keys to reducing the impacts of the southern pine beetle are prevention coupled with rapid detection and suppression. The National Forests within the Southern Region have large acreages of dense, mature pine forests, prime host material for the SPB. Thinning and the adjustment of species composition and stand structure required to improve forest health and thereby reduce susceptibility will take years to implement. In the interim, prompt detection and suppression of SPB infestations are the most effective tools for reducing losses.

The USDA Forest Service recommends the use of cut-and-remove for SPB suppression when environmental conditions and management guidelines do not preclude its implementation. Analyses have demonstrated that cut-and-remove is the most effective method of SPB infestation suppression. The currently-infested trees plus a buffer strip of uninfested trees around the area of infestation expansion are felled and removed from the site. This technique eliminates the source of attraction for the beetles and removes the beetles in the trees from the forest. This tactic also allows for utilization of the affected trees, and provides a monetary return to the U.S. Treasury.

The National Forests use timber sale contracts to implement cut-and-remove operations. This procedure has several disadvantages. First, treatment is dependent on market conditions. When mills are full, as they often are in the midst of SPB outbreaks, infestations designated for cut-and-remove may remain unsold, and suppression is delayed or not implemented and beetles continue to breed, kill trees, and spread to other land ownerships. Second, the use of timber sale contracts for cut-and-remove operations reinforces the contentions of Forest Service critics that SPB suppression is solely a means of selling government timber. Finally, an infestation must be ground-checked, marked for salvage, and advertised for sale before suppression can commence.

Even after the trees in an infestation have been sold, there is little incentive for the winning bidder to immediately initiate cut-and-remove operations. Regional estimates suggest the interval between marking an infestation for salvage and the initiation of suppression treatments should be no more than 18 days, but in practice it often takes 25-35 days. During this period, the infestation continues to expand, killing additional trees. Recent administrative decisions have dictated that if the volume of affected timber has increased by more than 50% between marking and initiation of salvage operations, the sale must be re-advertised for sale, resulting in additional tree mortality or the inability to salvage the infestation. Consequently timber markers must include very large buffer strips to ensure that the infestation will not expand beyond the marked boundary by the time removal begins. Clearly this is a prime example of process gridlock leading to poor management of our forest resources.

The SFIWC urges the Forest Service to reexamine its policies on SPB suppression. As with wildfire, SPB outbreaks create an emergency situation in which rapid action is clearly needed to protect forest health and other forest values. The immediate suppression of expanding infestations utilizing the most effective treatment method must be the primary goal. Good stewardship of our National Forests demands no less. *Cut-and-remove is a SPB suppression tactic, not a timber sale.* We suggest that the Forest Service develop alternatives to the timber sale contract that allow for the prompt suppression of active infestations. New policies and regulations are needed that provide for immediate cut and removal of SPB infestations while providing an equitable return to the Treasury based on current market values for green and salvage timber. We believe that a more efficient instrument for cut-and-remove on Forest Service lands can and should be developed.

Sincerely,

H. A. (Joe) Pase III, Chair
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cc: Michael Goergen, Society of American Foresters
Anne E. Heissenbuttel, National Association of State Foresters
Mike Zupko, Southern Group of State Foresters
Robert T. Jacobs, Regional Forester