

Statement of Congressman Denny Rehberg (MT-AL)
Joint Subcommittee Water and Power/National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee
June 16, 2009

Oversight Hearing
Western Pine Beetle Infestation in our Western forests

Thank you Chairwoman Napolitano, Chairman Grijalva and members of both subcommittees for allowing me to testify today on the Western Pine Beetle Infestation in our Western forests – the forests that many of the people I represent call home. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you what I have heard from Montanans and to explain our approach to healthy forest management.

The forests in Montana are quite different from the forests out east, or even in Colorado. On the East Coast, massive deciduous trees turn a variety of different colors each fall as the leaves fall off to conserve energy. In Colorado, massive aspen tree groves change to gold each fall. Montana's forests are primarily comprised of coniferous trees – or as we like to call them 'evergreens'. With evergreens, nature has a different strategy for surviving the winter – smaller leaves shaped like needles and sheathed in protective coatings require less energy during winter months. As a result, as the name implies, our forests remain green year-round.

Or, they are supposed to.

Lately, massive infestations of western pine beetles have left their mark on more than the trees. Like a teenager with a paintball gun in an art museum, splotches of rust orange and mucus yellow began to corrupt the tapestry of our majestic forests. It started small, a few trees peppered in a forest of millions, but eventually entire mountainsides turned yellow with the infestation. Visitors were forgiven for thinking that they were just seeing the annual lifecycle of a deciduous forest, but the locals knew that something was very wrong.

The western pine beetle has infested millions of acres of forests throughout the West. Thanks to drought and burdensome litigation, our forests have been inadequately managed as our local government agencies and timber companies have not been allowed to work hand-in-hand to combat this destructive insect. As a result, our western forests are now more vulnerable than ever to massive forest fires that can engulf entire communities, undermine energy reliability by burning transmission lines, destroy historical, cultural and recreational sites and seriously compromise endangered species and water quality. While these losses alone are costly to taxpayers, they don't include the vast amounts of money spent every year to combat forest fires that are fueled by pine beetle infested trees. I paint a picture of a vicious cycle where the victims are our once-prestigious green western forests and the American taxpayer.

And the problem is quickly getting worse.

With a lack of local healthy forest management, the western pine beetle has increased the mortality rate of mature trees in Montana National Forest lands two-fold in just one year, from 734,500 acres in 2007 to 1.8 million acres in 2008.

One area in particular, between Helena and Butte, has reported mortality levels 3-4 times higher in 2008 as compared to 2007. Additionally, at higher elevations, significant beetle-caused mortality has been noted in white bark pine stands on our state park lands and in Yellowstone National Park.

It's no coincidence that as the acreage of infestation has risen, so have the costs of forest fire suppression. The Forest Service spent approximately \$225 million in suppression funds in Montana over the last three fiscal years. The Bureau of Land Management has spent over \$33 million in the last three years compared to \$24 million in the subsequent three year time period. These costs are only for fighting the forest fires themselves; they do not include loss of infrastructure, wildlife and fish, habitat for endangered species and dollars generated from tourism.

Exhaustive research has been conducted over the years to determine the best methods for combating western pine beetle infestation. This research has proven time and again that the insect thrives in environments that are overcrowded, dense, and old growth -- particularly during periods of drought. Under epidemic outbreak conditions, enough beetles can emerge from one infested tree and kill several trees the following year.

The same research has also shown that the best way to combat the western pine beetle is through healthy forest management. As forest fires thrive in the same conditions as the insect, it is no surprise that we've seen a rise in fires in forests that have become victims of the western pine beetle. This relationship could be changed through healthy forest management such as creating forests with trees of various ages and sizes that are more resilient and less vulnerable to the western pine beetle.

Healthy forest management is best done at the local level by the men and women who live in the forests and can read its signs. As an example of this, I want to tell you of a success story near the ghost town of Garnet, Montana. Located just east of Missoula, the area surrounding this historic ghost town had become infested with the western pine beetle.

In 2006, as other forest fires raged in nearby forest lands of western Montana, local Bureau of Land Management officials were convinced that unless they thinned the forest around Garnet, they would lose the ghost town to a forest fire. Then, the beetles showed up and infected twice as many trees as they had done in previous years. Consequently, the BLM quickly teamed with Pyramid Mountain Lumber Company to remove up to 60 percent of the standing trees in the 320-plus-acre area in the fall of 2008.

The project successfully avoided sensitive cultural areas, saved a historical site, built several handicapped-accessible trails for recreational purposes, lessened the spread of the insect, promoted the diversification and growth of animal populations -- including the snowshoe hare and the Canada lynx -- and utilized every part of the dead trees removed. From these 320 acres alone, trees were milled into building construction lumber, pulped

into paper products and even used as energy to fuel the kilns where green lumber is dried and cured.

While this is just one success story on 320 acres in western Montana, our forests can be green once again, wild fires can be kept at bay, and every wood product from paper to energy can be produced – but only if our local professionals are allowed to thin the red and grey dying trees that have fallen victim to the western pine beetle. Through local healthy forest management, we can make substantial strides in a short amount of time.

The view and perspective for what is happening and how it should be fixed looks very different to an out-of-state bureaucrat flying overhead at 30,000 feet. When it comes to forest management, one size fits all solutions can often times cause more problems than they solve. We've got boots on the ground, and in the forests of Montana ready to do what is necessary to restore our forests to a healthy, green state. I only ask that we stay out of their way and allow them to do their jobs.