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DOF's targeted response to Southcentral Alaska's spruce beetle outbreak
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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DIVISION OF FORESTRY

Contact: Helge Eng | helge.eng@alaska.gov | 907.269.8474

The current spruce beetle outbreak has affected 1.6 million acres across Southcentral Alaska. While distressing to see, spruce beetle events are natural disturbances that cyclically renew Southcentral forests and create mixed-age stands. Options to remove beetle killed trees from the landscape are 1) selling salvage timber, either as large sales or small firewood sales, 2) contracting with operators to remove trees, or 3) providing financial assistance for the public and agencies to remove trees.

DOF has met the demand for salvage sales of timber on state land, and has coordinated agency review and provided reforestation exemptions for timber sales on Borough lands. Unfortunately, the demand for large salvage sales is quite low. State statutes include a salvage sale authority that streamlines the process; current laws do not hinder timber sales of beetle-kill. Rather, the limitations on timber sales of beetle-killed timber are economic in nature. DOF has only been able to sell a few large sales, partly because of decreased resource staffing since DOF budgets were cut in 2016, but mainly because the market value of white spruce trees in Southcentral Alaska is low. Beetle-kill salvage timber sales are uneconomical for an operator unless good road access already exists. Furthermore, because of the widespread nature of the outbreak, many timber operators in Southcentral Alaska today are being paid to remove hazardous trees, either on public or private lands. Most are not interested in buying a timber sale, even if road access already exists and the timber is sold at its statutory minimum and reforestation is not required.

In contrast, DOF offices in both Mat-Su and Kenai support robust firewood sale programs of beetle-killed trees that help to remove dead trees and mitigate spruce beetle hazard trees in areas with existing access. Still, the removal of beetle-killed spruce for firewood is quite small compared with the total outbreak acreage.

Since timber sales are not a viable option for dealing with most of the beetle-kill in Southcentral Alaska, the Division of Forestry has taken a targeted and multi-faceted approach to responding to the spruce beetle outbreak in Mat-Su and Kenai, focusing on beetle-kill mitigation in the wildland urban interface and at high-use recreational areas. DOF has:

- provided free disposal to the public of spruce beetle debris at waste transfer stations;
- contracted with businesses to remove beetle-kill in State Park campgrounds and public use areas throughout Mat-Su and Kenai;
- provided fire crews to remove dead trees in campgrounds, public use areas, and along park roads;
- funded State Parks staff to remove hazardous and dead trees;
- begun work on several fuel breaks to remove dead spruce and protect communities from wildfire;
- procured wood chippers to dispose of woody debris on fuels reduction projects;
- provided financial assistance to communities and private landowners to remove dead spruce trees;
- helped develop plans for dead tree removal in municipal parks;
- tracked the spruce beetle outbreak and educated the public about tactics for beetle prevention;
- researched ways to protect trees from spruce beetle attack;
- provided grants for beetle prevention, suppression, and restoration efforts; and
- cooperated with utility companies to remove trees identified as high risk of falling into power lines.

The harvested timber produced by these efforts has been provided free of charge to the public for firewood.

Looking forward, the Division hopes that the Legislature will approve the Governor's FY2023 DOF operating budget request for an increase of three foresters this year, and for an additional four foresters next year. Rebuilding and right-sizing the division will allow us to meet industry demand, provide access to state timber resources, and keep the public safe from hazardous trees and wildland fire.