

April 28, 2003



Dear Colleague,

As we approach what promises to be another devastating wildfire season, I wanted to bring your attention to the following article highlighting the declining health of Colorado's forests – and underscoring the need for fundamental reform to combat the worsening wildfire epidemic that threatens our communities, our air, our water, and precious wildlife habitat. With common-sense management techniques, we can prevent the catastrophic fires that the all-too-familiar insect infestations and unnaturally dense forests of in the west inevitably lead to. We can't afford to sit idly by when the warning signs are so obvious.

Let's empower **all** of our federal land managers by giving them the tools to address the threat of wildfire effectively and efficiently.

Call Mac Zimmerman at x. 57882 to become a cosponsor of HR 1679, the Forest Protection and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2003.

Sincerely,  
Tom Tancredo  
Member of Congress

**The Rocky Mountain News: Forests are on Piñons, Needles: *Beetle invasion set to begin again as mercury rises***  
**By Jim Erickson, Rocky Mountain News**

About half southwestern Colorado's piñon pines were killed last year by tiny, tunneling beetles, and the drought-fueled feeding frenzy is expected to resume this month as temperatures rise. If the drought persists, piñon ips beetles could kill most of the state's piñon pines in a few years, said David Leatherman, a Colorado State Forest Service entomologist.

"I guess it wouldn't surprise me, if the drought continues, that piñon - wherever it grows in the state - is probably going to witness this ips beetle kind of pushing it off the cliff. In some cases, there aren't going to be any trees left, and that will be the reason it (the epidemic) stops," Leatherman said. "They will eat themselves out of house and home."

Forestry officials are urging homeowners in the southern half of the state to spray the trunks and major limbs of healthy, high-value piñons with pesticide now, before the beetles fly from their winter hideouts to invade undamaged trees.

"They have not become active yet (this season), but it's just a matter of time," said Tom Eager, an entomologist with the U.S. Forest Service in Gunnison. I would be surprised if they're not out and about this month," he said.

Colorado's forests will carry the imprint of 2002 for decades to come. Drought, insects, disease and wildfire joined forces last year to cause "landscape-scale changes" that were "largely outside the range of conditions seen historically in Colorado," according to the annual report on forest health issued by the Colorado State Forest Service. Fires burned more than 500,000 acres of Colorado forest last year. At the same time, various bark beetles devoured drought-weakened trees at all elevations. Vast swaths of subalpine firs, spruces, Douglas firs, lodgepole pines, ponderosa pines and piñon pines were ravaged. Ips beetles created a sea of red trees in Colorado's southwest corner, killing half the piñons in Montezuma, La Plata, Dolores and San Miguel counties, according to the Colorado State Forest Service. Extensive ips damage also occurred along the southern Front Range, sweeping northward to Colorado Springs. Mountain pine-beetle populations, which have nearly doubled each year since the mid-1990s, claimed another 600,000 Colorado ponderosa and lodgepole pines last year.

In Routt National Forest, north of Steamboat Springs, the toll of beetle-infested Engelmann spruce trees approached 1 million. The Routt epidemic began with a freak 1997 windstorm that blew down 13,000 acres of spruces. The widespread bug damage is transforming the appearance and composition of Colorado's forests, reducing wildlife habitat and providing tinder-dry fuel for future wildfires. In some places, it will reduce property values and could impact the tourist industry.

"We have a major bark-beetle thing going on in every forest type in the state, from the timberline all the way to the prairie, and the common denominator is drought," Leatherman said.

Colorado has about 21 million forested acres, and piñon-juniper woodland accounts for 20 percent of the total - 4.2 million acres. About 40 percent of the state's piñons, roughly 1.7 million acres, are now infested, Leatherman said. That number will rise as a bugs eat their way north along the Western Slope.

On the west side of the state, severe piñon ips damage currently extends north to Norwood, about 65 miles south of Grand Junction. But the pines stretch along the Western Slope all the way to Wyoming, and the bugs are expected to follow the food northward. Piñons are squat, sprawling pines that normally don't grow much taller than 20 feet. In Colorado, they live mainly on the Western Slope and along

the southern Front Range from the New Mexico border to a bit north of Colorado Springs. They live at elevations of 4,000 to 9,000 feet, usually alongside junipers.

Piñon ips beetles are dark-colored tunnelers about the size of an uncooked grain of rice. They aren't as aggressive as mountain pine beetles and usually prey on weakened trees. The multiyear drought, combined with unnaturally dense forests resulting from a century of wildfire suppression, created "ideal conditions" for the current epidemic, according to the "2002 Report on the Health of Colorado's Forests." The outbreak began in 2000 and exploded last year.

"This beetle is an opportunist," Eager said. "It needs weak trees, and it's got a bunch of them now. If we have more drought years like last year, it's a no-brainer that we would definitely lose most of our (piñon) trees," he said.

Adult piñon ips beetles bore beneath the tree's bark to mate and lay eggs. The resulting larvae burrow into the tree's spongy, nutrient-rich cambium layer and feed, eventually girdling the tree and killing it. Needles on infested trees quickly fade from green to a straw color, later turning red and eventually brown. By the time the tree appears to be dying, a new generation of beetles is already maturing beneath the bark. Some piñon ips beetles spend the winter beneath the bark, then emerge in the spring to jump-start the cycle. The ips epidemic extends beyond Colorado borders into five other Western states: Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada and California. Treating such vast expanses with pesticide is not feasible; only a return to normal rainfall patterns will end the ips beetle plague. In southwest Colorado, Montezuma County has sustained some of the most severe losses. The Cortez, Mancos and Dolores areas have been hard-hit, along with Mesa Verde National Park.