

Officials study threat to Fort Collins' water supply from beetle-kill trees

BY **BOBBY MAGILL** • BobbyMagill@coloradoan.com • May 7, 2010

What happens if the Poudre River watershed, which Fort Collins relies on for part of its drinking water supply, is scorched by a catastrophic wildfire fed by dead trees killed by bark beetles?

With the city's Poudre River water supply threatened by wildfire, dead tree removal, falling trees and even large volumes of decaying pine needles, Fort Collins water officials are scrambling for answers.

The heart of the issue, said Fort Collins water resources manager Kevin Gertig, is the potential for eroding hillsides in the wake of fire and falling trees that could send large amounts of silt and pine needles pouring into the river, affecting water quality.

To figure out the extent of the problem, Fort Collins, Greeley, the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies are working with a consulting firm to study how the beetle-ravaged forests will impact the cities' water supplies and what can be done before a catastrophic wildfire to protect the city's water.

The study, expected to be completed this summer, will pinpoint areas of the forests west of Fort Collins that are particularly vulnerable to erosion after beetle-affected trees die, fall or burn.

The Forest Service estimates that a staggering 100,000 trees per day could soon begin falling across the beetle-ravaged areas of Northern Colorado and southern Wyoming.

Gertig said that if all those trees fall and rain or melting snow causes heavy runoff, large volumes of soil could flow into the Poudre, causing a serious water quality problem.

"We're fortunate enough to have two water sources," said Judy Billica, an engineer and watershed manager for the city. "If there was a problem on the Poudre, we'd shut down our intake. If the turbidity in the water hits a certain value, we'd turn that intake off. That's our first line of defense."

The city's other water supply is Horsetooth Reservoir, which was used as the city's sole source of drinking water after two asphalt tankers rolled into the Poudre River last year, spilling taffy-like tar into the river and forcing the city to temporarily shut off its Poudre River water intake.

Billica said the severity of a wildfire's impact on the Poudre River depends on where the fire is and how it causes the land to erode.

The study will help a variety of local, state and federal agencies work together if a catastrophe occurs in the forest and figure out ways of preventing one before it happens, Gertig said.

Meanwhile, the Forest Service is cracking down on utilities and ski resorts with power lines and other structures that could be threatened by falling beetle-killed trees.

Those companies are responsible for maintaining their facilities on national forest land and handling the threat of falling trees on their own, said Mary Ann Chambers, spokeswoman for the Forest Service's Bark Beetle Incident Management Team in Fort Collins.

Regional Forester Rick Cables earlier this year called the threat of falling trees to power lines, roads and people an emergency situation.

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"If the power lines weren't there, we would not have to worry about cutting trees down to protect power lines," Chambers said. "It's the Forest Service's position (that) it's the power companies' job to protect their own power lines."

Roosevelt National Forest spokeswoman Reghan Cloudman said she didn't know how many power line corridors are threatened by hazard beetle-killed trees on the Canyon Lakes Ranger District west of Fort Collins or which utilities may be affected.

Hazard tree removal also may keep campgrounds and other recreation areas closed this summer, Chamber said.

The Forest Service, she said, will publish a list of closures before Memorial Day weekend.

Recreation areas near Fort Collins are likely the first to be temporarily closed because of bark beetle projects this summer, she said, but details of those closures are not yet available.



Dead lodge pole pines still standing in the Glac Basin campground in the November 2009 photo. (Coloradoan library)

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