

**U.S. Senate**  
**Committee on Appropriations**  
**Subcommittee on Interior**  
**Statement of**  
**REPRESENTATIVE MARK UDALL**  
**Field Hearing Regarding the Severe Bark Beetle Infestation in the State of Colorado**  
**May 5, 2008**  
**Eagle County Courthouse**  
**Eagle, Colorado**

Senator Allard, thank you for convening this field hearing regarding an issue that I have been working on for a number of years—the forest health and community impacts of the bark beetle epidemic that is affecting many parts of the western United States, but especially the central and northern mountains of Colorado.

When this epidemic was just taking off in the early part of this decade, I contacted the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help communities prepare for fires and floods that would come from the large stands of beetle-killed trees, and was successful in convening a meeting with the affected communities and regions with FEMA last year in Granby, Colorado. As early as 1999, former Rep. Joel Hefley and I worked together to introduce legislation easing restrictions on thinning projects in our National Forests, and I also supported the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, which streamlined the process for identifying and implementing forest treatment projects to reduce fire threats to communities and watersheds.

In 2005, Representative John Salazar and I convened a meeting with local communities and affected interests in Winter Park, Colorado, in the fall of 2005 to explore potential Congressional responses to the bark beetle epidemic. That meeting led to the introduction in 2006 of the Rocky Mountain Forest Insects Response Enhancement and Support—or Rocky Mountain FIRES—Act, a bill designed to provide the Forest Service and Interior Department with more tools and resources to respond to this serious problem. Portions of that bill were later incorporated into the Colorado Congressional delegation bill, H.R. 3072 the Colorado Forest Management Improvement Act of 2007, which was introduced late summer of last year to help provide additional resources to address the threats from beetle-killed trees. I appreciate the you and Senator Ken Salazar have introduced the Senate companion (S. 1797) of this important legislation.

In addition to this delegation bill, I have introduced three other bills this year to help address the implications of this beetle epidemic and help communities better mitigate, respond to and address the potential fires, floods and other impacts associated with large-scale tree mortality. These bills include:

- H.R. 5216, the Wildfire Risk Reduction and Renewable Biomass Utilization Act, would revise the definition of renewable biomass established by section 201 of the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007 so as to facilitate and encourage the use of biomass removed from certain additional forest lands as an energy source, in order to reduce the risk of severe wildfire to communities, infrastructure, and water supplies. This biomass would include trees killed by the bark beetle.
- H.R. 5218, the Fire-Safe Communities Act, a companion to Senator Diane Feinstein's S. 2390, would provide incentives for at-risk communities to adopt a new model Fire Safe ordinance that will set national standards in building codes, creation of "defensible space" around homes, and reduction of hazardous fuels. It also would authorize new Federal grants to help communities integrate fire-resisting aspects into local ordinances, and would authorize increased Federal reimbursement of firefighting costs to participating communities.
- H.R. 5241, the Colorado Forest Insect Emergency Response Act of 2008, which would amend the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 to allow certain forest treatment projects (such as thinning) in areas hard hit by the bark beetle and within community wildfire protection plans to be categorically excluded from environmental reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act.

These bills promote preventative measures—actions that will help reduce damaging wildfire threats. Preventative measures—such as reducing fuel loads—are vastly more cost effective than fighting fires once they start. Fire suppression costs are consuming an every increasing part of the budgets of the Forest Service and the other land management agencies. These costs are only likely to increase given the spread of the bark beetle, drought and other factors.

That is why I support another bill, H.R. 5541, the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement Act or FLAME Act. This bill would provide a supplemental funding source for catastrophic emergency wildland fire suppression activities on Department of the Interior and National Forest System lands and to require the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture to develop a cohesive wildland fire management strategy. It would create a fund that would be separate from the budgeted and appropriated agency wildland fire suppression funding and be used only for catastrophic, emergency wildland fires. The Federal land management agencies will continue to fund anticipated and predicted wildland fire suppression activities within their annual budgets.

By establishing this separate fund, the bill would help free up funds so that the federal land agencies can perform all the other missions and activities we demand of them as well as help fund additional preventative forest health treatment measures and projects.

Senator Allard, as you know Colorado and other Rocky Mountain States face a very real risk of severe wildfires in our forest lands, which directly threaten many communities and critical resources, including water supplies.

There are several reasons. One is drought. Another is past management that over-emphasized fire suppression, even though fire is an inescapable part of the ecology of our western forests, with

the result that in many parts of the forests there is an accumulation of underbrush and small-diameter trees greater than would be present if there had been more, smaller fires over the years. They provide the extra fuel that can turn a small fire into an intense inferno.

The problem has been made worse by our growing population and increasing development in the places where communities meet the forests—the “wildland-urban interface.” And when you add the effects of widespread infestations of insects, you have a recipe for even worse to come. Many species of bark beetles, such as the mountain pine beetle, are native to our forests. They place stress on trees by burrowing through the bark. If a tree is healthy, it can defend itself by producing sap to repel and expel the invaders. But if the defense fails, the insects lay their eggs in the woody material below the bark. Once the eggs hatch, they feed on the tree's fiber and disrupt the flow of water and nutrients from the tree's roots to its needles and branches. In addition, the invading insects bring in fungi and other invaders that further damage the tree. If enough insects are able to penetrate the tree and lay eggs, the tree dies. The offspring then mature and fly to another tree and the cycle begins anew.

These insects help to balance tree densities and set the stage for fires and thereby the generation of new tree growth. And when forests are healthy and there are adequate supplies of water, the insects' effects are relatively low-scale and isolated. But under the right conditions—such as drought, unusually warm winters, or when there are dense stands of even-aged trees—the insects can cause large-scale tree mortality, turning whole mountainsides and valleys rust red. That is what is happening in many mountainous areas in Colorado. And more and more our mountain communities find themselves in uncomfortable proximity to acres of dead trees, turned rust red by the insects and adding to their concerns about the danger of very severe wildfires. All Coloradans were reminded of this earlier this year when the Federal and State foresters reported that the beetle infestation first detected in 1996 grew by a half-million acres last year, bringing the total number of acres attacked by bark beetles to 1.5 million, and has spread further into Front Range counties east of the Continental Divide.

We cannot eradicate insects from our forests—nor should we, because insects are a natural part of forest ecosystems. Instead, we can and should act to reduce the wildfire threats to our communities—and their residents' lives and property—as well as to promote research on ways to improve the health of our forest lands. All of the bills I have mentioned have been in response to this epidemic and the larger issue of forest health. We need to continue to work together—at the local, state and federal level—to respond to these issues and make our communities safer and protect lives, property and water supplies. The economy and environment of our state demand no less.