

# Northern Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative

## A Look Back at 2006

December 12, 2006

### *What is the Northern Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative?*

The Northern Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative (**formed October/November 2005**) consists of local county and municipality governments in Grand, Eagle, Jackson, Routt, and Summit counties; Colorado State Forest Service; the Bureau of Land Management; and the U.S. Forest Service. The Cooperative works locally with private landowners, major utility companies, conservation districts, water districts, and industry leaders.

The **purpose** of the Cooperative is to develop a comprehensive program to address bark beetle epidemics, protect important human and resource values, and reduce wildfire hazard across multiple landscapes and jurisdictions in Northern Colorado.

Our initial focus was to make the situation known and understood so that resources could be allocated to the problem through all responsible entities. In addition to creating an awareness about the problems associated with the bark beetle epidemic, the push was to seek adequate resources to deal with the issue.

The Cooperative is working toward **the Next Forest, the Next Forest Community, and the Next Forest Economy** with our investment focused on building resilience in our forests and reducing the risk of loss when large scale fires move across the landscape. The Cooperative is also generating ideas to work toward a sustainable forest products industry for Northern Colorado. Local communities have economies that are tied to surrounding forests. All efforts are community based to insure that outcomes are aligned with local community visions.

### *Accomplishments to Date*

The initial work of the Cooperative was to assess the area most intensively affected by the bark beetle, find out what efforts were already ongoing in the five county area, and develop a Strategy for how to approach the problem. The Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the State of Colorado, and local governments worked collectively to create, "**Strategy for Action and assessment of the Bark Beetle Situation**" (**February 2006**), a document describing the situation and providing information about projects ready to be implemented to improve forest conditions.

The **Assessment** mapped current infestations and projected progression of the epidemics. It identified several **values at risk**:

- communities will face increased wildfire threat;
- ski areas that are losing aesthetic and practical values provided by tree cover, such as visual quality and snow retention;
- developed recreation areas where hazard trees threaten public safety;
- watersheds that can suffer damage to soils and increased sediment in streams from potentially severe wildfires;

- habitat that is damaged by loss of nest trees and large trees that support many species;
- transmission lines that can be lost or damaged in severe wildfires; and
- Timber (580,000 acres—or about 80 percent of the suitable timber base—are moderately to highly susceptible to infestation).

The **Strategy for Action**, comprising short- and long-term phases, has been built by the Cooperative to deal comprehensively with the epidemic.

Once the situation was understood, a steering committee and an implementation team were formed to move the effort forward (**February 2006**). These two groups included representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, the State of Colorado, Bureau of Land Management and local governments. The larger Cooperative identified challenges that prevented the progress that was needed to protect the **values at risk**. The **barriers to implementation** that were identified were grouped into four major categories.

- Legislative / Political
- Administrative
- Industry / Business
- Communications / Education

These challenges, in part, defined the work that the Cooperative had for 2006.

### ***Relationships***

We talked and met with county governments and municipalities (**April/May 2006**), local citizen groups, water districts, utility boards (**June 2006**), research, academia, legislators, and fire protection districts (**June – August 2006**). We established relationships based upon a common understanding of the issues at hand and a collective responsibility to deal with them.

The partners in the Cooperative made two trips to Washington D.C. (**January and July 2006**) to talk with Department (USDA, USDI) and Agency (USFS, BLM) heads, and legislators about the problem, our cooperative efforts, and the need for resources. We provided field trips, congressional tours, brainstorming sessions, and opportunities to meet with local grassroots organizations over the past year.

The **relationships** that were formed through these efforts were the **focus** of the **BITE** group for the **first year**, created a cohesive group that evolved into widespread **think tank**, with thoughts and ideas forming daily. These relationships and ideas were fueled by the ever increasing number of red, dead, and dying trees across the landscapes of the heavily visited communities in Northern Colorado.

The trees, the communities, and the people who would be dealing with it became **big news**. Media outlets across Colorado, the western U.S, and even some international outlets and a recent movie picked up the fading forests of the western U.S.

### **What we learned through these relationships was:**

- Counties, municipalities, and the resort industry have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on efforts to battle the beetles, and protect high value areas such as homes, scenic corridors, and recreation sites and businesses.
- Public land management agencies are viewed by many as slow to respond to the problem.
- Using new tools (HFI, HFRA, stewardship contracting) the FS and BLM have many projects through planning, but few funds to implement.
- Federal rules and regulations are often cumbersome and time consuming, creating barriers to partnering and/or getting needed fuel reduction work done on federal lands.
- There is a lack of industry infrastructure to deal with the non-merchantable biomass that is building up as a result of the bark beetle epidemic.
- Existing government processes stifle the creation of industry (little guarantee of long term supply, inability to provide supply in a consistent and timely manner).
- Large landscape scale wildfire as a result of a massive number of beetle-killed trees is a certainty. The only questions are when and where the fires will be over the next ten to fifteen years.
- The current populations of the pine beetle are so large and widespread that some tools (i.e., thinning susceptible stands) previously used to suppress the mountain pine beetle are found to be no longer effective.
- The social and economic impacts of this rapidly changing landscape are certain, but not understood. Most of Colorado, and the five county area covered by the Cooperative depend upon the forests in a tourism based economy

### **What the NCBBC has initiated because of what we learned:**

Communications and education efforts are ongoing throughout the affected communities and within each entity to create an awareness of the reasons for the beetle epidemic and the need to take action to protect high value areas.

Every entity involved in the Cooperative is seeking funding and resources from all available sources to respond to this effort.

The Colorado wood (COWOOD) effort, a cooperative group based in the Colorado State Forest Service, has been working on supporting existing wood industry with technical assistance, and continues to work with businesses, communities, and local government to develop uses for wood, especially small diameter, low value trees.

Plans and contingency plans (organizational structure, project prioritization, etc.) are being created to respond rapidly to anticipated fluctuating budget numbers.

Several organizations have approached us to use our effort in research to understand the socio-economic impacts of the epidemic. **Some of the efforts we are engaged in include:**

1. Brookings Institution - the Brookings Institution will be supporting our Cooperative with cutting edge analysis about emergency management planning and landscape analysis. They will be looking into how to align resource objectives, land management practices and community planning with the dynamics of fire dependent ecosystems. Toward this effort, the U.S. Forest Service will be using a NIMO team to prepare interagency/intergovernmental fire prevention and fire suppression strategies to address the immediate severe risk of a mega-fire situation.
2. University of Illinois – The University is conducting a “**Colorado Community Assessment: Community Response to Forest Disturbance by Bark Beetles in Colorado**”. In response to the bark beetle outbreak in north central Colorado, the US Forest Service (Region 2 and the Pacific Northwest Research Station) has funded research on how local communities are responding to forest health changes. The field based portion of this project will begin in May 2006. Six communities have been selected for study: Vail, Frisco, Granby, Walden, Kremmling, and Steamboat Springs. If time and resources allow, Dillon and Silverthorne will be added.
3. U.S. Forest Service, Region 2 – the region is looking into partnering with others to do an economic study on the affected area to understand the potential economic impacts of the epidemic.
4. Jim Morrison, U.S. Forest Service – Jim is looking into gathering information from all the areas that have recently been required to rapidly respond to natural disasters (hurricanes, fires, floods, etc.) to create some “how to” understanding to the best procedures, organizations, methods, and techniques to handle such situations.
5. Legislative efforts – we continue to provide information and answer questions about our findings to the legislative branch as they continue to work on new legislation to address the issue.
6. Local governments are seeking grants (possibly with NFF) to take the initial steps to organize a forest products cooperative in northwestern Colorado that will help to provide financial incentives to small companies to enter or re-invest in the wood production network. At the same time, a reinvigorated locally sustainable wood products industry will help to diversify local economies that will be necessary for managing the new forests that will eventually emerge from the dead forest.

7. Fire mitigation, tree spraying, and beetle suppression work are being expedited in high value areas (residential subdivisions, ski areas, business areas, scenic corridors) across all ownerships.

### ***The Value***

All the people, organizations, agencies, and governments involved with the Cooperative have lists of accomplishments toward this effort on their own (to be highlighted separately). The value that the Cooperative brings is the **trust and ability to leverage** all those efforts and gain more ground toward a common vision. It is the relationships and the trust building over the past year that have been the focus and created a foundation that can be built upon.