

Parks to step up prescribed burns to combat beetle

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It's kind of like preservation through destruction. The idea is to burn the trees in order to save them.

With many trees of an age that makes them susceptible to mountain pine beetle and drought conditions over the last six to seven years, Jasper's pine trees are sick.

Using prescribed burns throughout the park in the coming years, some in the cabin lake area near the Jasper townsite, will reinvigorate the forest, create younger habitat and ultimately save the trees.

"I would say there's no such thing as a healthy pine tree anymore and that's basically because we've been in drought for the last six to seven years," said Dave Smith, the park's fire and vegetation specialist.

Between 200 to 300 pine trees have so far this year been detected as having a mountain pine beetle infestation in Jasper National Park. That number has remained steady over the last five years, Smith said.

About half of the infected trees can be found in and around the Jasper townsite area or the three valley confluence. This is a result of the wind slowing down once the valley opens up.

Parks tries to eliminate as many of the trees as they can each year.

While Smith considers the pine beetle more of a concern in Jasper than a problem, it's a huge problem elsewhere and has the potential to become as bad here. For one, trees that are most susceptible to mountain pine beetle are trees that are 80 years old or more, and according to Smith, that makes up most of the trees in the Miette and Athabasca valleys and throughout much of the park.

A young pine tree has enough sap to drown out the beetles that are attacking the tree, but as it ages, it doesn't have the same vigour.

One method used in JNP to control the pine beetle is to look for infested trees, cut them down and burn them to eliminate the beetles. Smith said it seems to be working in Jasper because the numbers are quite small, but as the number of trees that are infested by the pine beetle increases, the chances of being successful in controlling the beetle goes down.

He said that in other areas, the effectiveness of this method is yet to be seen and hasn't been that effective, and with the combination of a park full of old pine trees brought on by the lack of fire, along with drought conditions, park officials have every right to be concerned.

"Right now, we've created a situation where we have an open highway from one end of the park to the other of trees that are all susceptible to beetle," Smith said. With so many trees being susceptible, the solution Parks is using is to put more prescribed fires on the landscape, not to try to burn the beetle out, but with the idea of creating a mosaic of both older and younger trees or different stand-ages. When that happens, some areas might be susceptible to fire or pine beetle, but

overall, the forest is healthier.

Frigid winters have historically kept the pine beetle at bay, but warmer temperatures have meant the beetles have thrived.

“What we need is to have a cold enough winter or a cold enough spell in the winter to kill pine beetles in their larval stage as they over-winter in the trees,” said Smith.

This winter through to next spring, Parks Canada will concentrate their efforts on doing prescribed burns in the Vine Creek area, Henry House and the east boundary area, which will help in the fight against the mountain pine beetle.

Some areas around the townsite are earmarked for prescribed burns but are two to three years away, Smith said. In the next three to four years, crews plan to start picking away at the Cabin Lake area upwind of the townsite.

The warden service encourages people to contact them if they come across any tree, residential or otherwise, which may be infested with mountain pine beetle.

What to look for: Red needles on the crowns of the tree, egg larva or their j-shaped galleries under the bark, pitch tubes – bubbles of resin on the trunk found at mid-tree level – saw-dust at the base of the tree or in bark crevasses, and last, woodpecker activity.