

ROCKY MOUNTAIN OUTLOOK

Heli-logging of beetle-killed trees under way in Kananaskis Country

By Rob Alexander - Spray Valley

May 10 2007

As the shadow of the small five-seater helicopter glides over the ragged canopy of lodgepole pines, it is impossible to tell that a few thousand beetle-attacked trees had been removed recently from the forest.

The only real indicators that crews have been cutting beetle-killed trees are the burn piles and, sitting nearby, the huge 15-seater Bell 212 helicopter, the workhorse used to yard logs from the forest and lift them to nearby burn piles.

Otherwise, no clear cutting, heavy equipment and damaging skid trails can be found whatsoever.

Rupert Hewison, a southern Rockies forest health technician with Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (SRD), said helicopter logging is a fast and efficient method to remove infested pine trees from the forest with minimal disturbance on the ground.

This type of operation is a lot cleaner, especially if you are getting into a skidder operation, because you have to make roads and everything like that. This is a very, very light footprint, Hewison said Friday, April 27.

Once on the ground in a stand of pine that saw 36 trees removed, the only sign of the work are branches lying on the ground and low-cut stumps. As it is from the air, it's difficult to see the work and it is surprising to learn the B.C. helicopter logging company, Valhalla Helicopters, have removed a total of roughly 4,300 trees from the west and east sides of the lake between April 14 and 29.

Known as the Rotor-Wing Assist Operation, helicopter logging is also cost effective.

Because of the volume, they (helicopter logging crews) can produce and the speed they can work at, they are very, very cost effective, even compared to hand crews that fell and burn. Simply because hand crews, they don't just drop the tree, they have to cut it up and burn it.

Spotters identified beetle-killed trees from the air last summer, a job made easier by the distinctive brownish-red colour needles on the dead trees. The spotters mark the area on a map with a Global Positioning System and ground crews go in later to flag trees.

Once attacked, beetles remain in a tree until the following summer, giving land managers time to cut down attacked trees before the beetles move on to the next stand.

Now that SRD, along with neighbouring jurisdictions such as Parks Canada, has a few years experience battling the beetle, Hewison said they are getting a sense of how the beetles spread and where they'll find the most susceptible stands, allowing land managers to predict where the beetles will likely move next.

You know where your core is going to be and you start looking around the outside to see if it is getting any farther. They are after very particular types of trees, he said.

Mountain pine beetle prefer older, larger trees, especially ones that are already under stress.

Meanwhile, SRD last week announced \$50 million in emergency funding to continue fighting the spread of the mountain pine beetle as the number of beetle-attacked trees in Alberta, mostly in the northern part of the province, has seen a dramatic increase, jumping from 20,000 infested trees to an estimated three million.

In the Bow Corridor region, SRD has said 6,327 infested trees have been found in Kananaskis Country.

Each of those trees contains enough beetles to infest a further five to 10 trees. Given those numbers, the province has said that six million hectares are at risk, roughly 15 per cent of Alberta's forests.

While it is tempting to let nature run its course, Hewison said doing so would only serve to create a massive forest fire hazard.

Large-scale forest fires would create yet another series of dilemmas and hazards, with watershed concerns in heavily burned regions.

For now, intensive control efforts continue to be the order of the day, especially given that the lengthy stretches of Arctic weather necessary to kill them over winter is not occurring.

The mountain pine beetle is a natural insect to Canada. Just because of the weather patterns, its come out of its normal range and there's just not enough predators to keep up with it, Hewison said.

In southern Alberta, including the Bow Valley, SRD has been able to keep pace with the spread of the rice-sized beetle and its voracious appetite, but with warm summers and mild winters, the beetles have a large food source available.

As a result, the province has implemented a contentious plan to ask timber companies to adjust their cutting plans and target stands susceptible to beetle infestation, thereby removing the food source.

The plan, however, has its opponents. The Bragg Creek Environmental Coalition is calling on the province to allow nature to run its course.

With files from Katie Schneider, Cochrane Eagle.