

Vail creating barrier against fire

Crews cutting trees in hopes stopping wildfire from jumping between neighborhoods and the forest

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August 27, 2007

VAIL — As the color red has grown in the forest, so have Sandra Spaeh's worries.

Her home, near West Vail, is just two doors down from the forest, where as much as 90 percent of lodgepole pines are dead or dying. The mountain pine beetle epidemic has hit her neighborhood hard.

Whether it's a lightning strike or a barbecue sparking a blaze, Spaeh says she understands the risk of a destructive forest fire.

Who's paying?

Contributions for this year's work includes:

- \$137,000 from the town of Vail.
- \$180,000 from the Forest Service.
- \$250,000 from Eagle County.
- \$90,000 in state grants.

So she's grateful that town, county and the U.S. Forest Service are cooperating to create a layer of "defensible space" — a 200-to-300-foot barrier — that aims to stop the spread of a fire, either from the forest into the neighborhood or vice versa.

"This is a really good thing," Spaeh said.

Trees are being removed on almost 200 acres of land around Vail. Much of that work will happen this fall, and workers are already clearing a landing spot for a helicopter, which will haul out felled trees.

Above Intermountain and Matterhorn in West Vail, crews will cut about 8,000 trees, starting in the next couple of weeks.

For more information

Call the town of Vail's pine beetle hotline at 477-3509, Eagle County at 328-8742 or the Forest Service at 328-6388.

Downed trees will be taken away by helicopter, likely in the last week of September or the first week of October. The helicopter is less harmful to the hillside than trucks.

Experts talk about the dying trees as fuel that's just waiting to burn.

"From the impact from the pine beetle, eventually there's going to be a lot of fuel building up there," said Phil Bowden of the Forest Service. "You want to have space between where that fuel will be building up and the homes so you can defend homes."

The "defensible space" also creates a staging area where firefighters can set up when they have to fight a blaze, Bowden said.

The red needles around West Vail are very flammable, said Eric Lovgren, who is supervising a portion of the work for Eagle County.

"Anybody who's been around a campfire and thrown some pine needles on it knows they can be volatile," Lovgren said.

And when the trees fall, that puts a lot of flammable stuff on the ground, too, Lovgren said.

While the pine-beetle epidemic is an environmental worry in Vail, some of the felled trees will go toward a "green" cause: biomass energy.

The county is selling the logs to Confluence Energy, which has built a wood-pellet mill in Kremmling. The pellets are used in special furnaces that heat homes while emitting relatively little pollution.


The county will provide 5,000 tons of biomass to Confluence Energy this year, and 1,000 tons per year for the next five years, Lovgren said.

Work will go beyond the area above the Intermountain and Matterhorn neighborhoods. This year, work in Vail will also happen:

- Near the North Trail adjacent to Davos Trail.
- Along the north side of Interstate 70 between the Son of Middle Creek Trail and North Trail.
- Along the North Trail that begins in the Red Sandstone neighborhood.
- Near Bighorn Creek.

Workers will also likely be burning some brush piles above West Vail this fall.

The work is part of the Vail Valley Forest Health Project, a multi-year plan that stretches from Vail to



Last summer, the town worked with the Forest Service to cut 2,100 trees on 16 acres above Westhaven Drive near Donovan Park.

Vail has hired a six-man “hand crew” this year to cut trees on land owned by the town. The crew also will advise homeowners on how to cut trees on their land.

The town of Vail is slated to commit \$2 million to the forest health project from 2004 through 2010.

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