

Forest Health

Background – Washington state has over 51 percent of its landmass in timberlands. The majority of these timberlands are in federal management (44%) with the remainder spread out over private industrial (20%), private non-industrial (19%), state trust lands (10%), tribal (6%), and other (1%).

The state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the land manager for all of the state's trust lands, enforces laws pertaining to the state Forest Practices Act (RCW 76.09), and administers provisions related to forest insect and disease control (RCW 76.06). DNR's authority applies to all timberland in the state, except the tribal and federal lands that encompass 54 percent of timberlands within the state.

Timberland owners, both public and private, pay additional taxes on their property to help support the costs of fighting fires in the state, which in large part can be attributed to unhealthy forest conditions. The tax on timberlands is known as the Forest Fire Protection Assessment Rate.

The Problem – Diseases and insects are a natural part of the forest ecosystem. However, there is today an unprecedented amount of timber damage in our state from these pests. Every year DNR performs an annual flight survey of the mortality of timber on the 21 million acres of timberland in Washington. Today it is estimated that more than 13 percent of annual forest growth is lost to wood destroying organisms and diseases.

The damage caused by disease and insects in western Washington is not nearly as severe as in eastern Washington. It is primarily in eastern Washington that fire, bark beetles and root diseases have taken their toll on forests. However, the recent windstorm of December 1-3, 2007 caused over 29,000 acres of timber blowdown, making these forests susceptible to forest fires along the western coastal areas of Washington.

Factors Contributing to Infestations – There are a number of reasons why the condition of our forests has reached epidemic proportion. Some of these are:

Fire Suppression – Since the 1940s the policy of the US Forest Service and the state DNR has been to suppress fires. In the past, wildfires in the West were treated as a natural part of the timber ecosystem, and limited much of the undergrowth and dead timber present in our forests today. Today, forest fires in Washington are much larger and more devastating due to the lack of aggressive management, regardless of whether they are started naturally by lightning strikes or by careless individuals.

Washington experienced an active wildfire season in 2007. There were 1,259 fires that burned 216,995 acres, a significant decrease from the 462,000 acres burned in 2006. Low precipitation, low humidity, frequent winds, lightning, and concentrations of insect-killed dead and dying trees created extremely dangerous conditions.

Native Species of Trees – In eastern Washington, many of our forests are now populated with Douglas Firs, which are not as resistant to fires as are the native Ponderosa Pine and the Western Larch. The Douglas Firs grow much more densely, and in the arid climate of eastern Washington deprive each tree of much-needed moisture. These trees and surrounding timber naturally succumb to stress under these conditions and provide an opportunity for insects and diseases to infest forests in their weakened state.

Regulations and Policy Decisions – The state’s timberlands -- federal, state, and private -- have not been logged as extensively as in the past. As more environmental regulations have dictated forest practices, the ability of timber managers to actively manage these lands through logging activities or prescribed burning has been severely curtailed. For example, even though the federal government manages 44 percent of the timberlands in Washington state, only 2 percent of the recent annual volume of timber harvested comes from these federal timberlands.

Climatic Changes – There is an evolving consensus among climatologists that the Western U.S. has been through unique wet and mild weather and is now moving into a more normal weather cycle, a much drier environment. Some have expressed concern that our state may be on the cusp of a dry cycle for the next 30 years.

Why We Need to Address Forest Health

- Diseases and insects cause extensive damage to timber that has great monetary value. If we continue to allow these infestations to spread to adjacent timber, then other lands will also become infected. Economic losses of timber have ramifications that impact all in the forest industry and manufacturers who rely on forest products.
- Our state’s trust timberlands provide a revenue stream for K-12 construction, state universities, and counties. By keeping our forests healthy, the state will ensure needed funds for these trusts and ease the burden on taxpayers who supplement these institutions with funding from the General Fund and state bonds.
- The cost of fighting wildfires in Washington state is great to both taxpayers and landowners who pay the forest fire protection assessment. The current biennial allotment for DNR’s Resource Protection Division is \$43.1 million. This is an increase of \$5 million from the 2005-07 biennium.
- Public safety demands the state do all it can to protect residents and communities from the ravages of wildfires. During the Firestorm of 1991, 112 families lost their homes in Spokane County. In 1994 Chelan County had over 185,000 acres burning for three weeks, with more than \$69 million in fire suppression costs. Thirty-seven homes and 76 outbuildings were destroyed by this fire in the Wenatchee National Forest. The cause of the fires was a single lightning storm that ignited 41 fires in the National Forest and over 99 in the state. The forest health conditions of today are much worse than in 1991 and 1994.
- The environmental damage done by catastrophic fires must also be considered. When a fire of this magnitude burns, it is so hot that it sterilizes the soil and makes future replanting of saplings very difficult. Air quality and also water quality, from sedimentation runoff, is severely impaired. Wildlife are killed or displaced.
- It’s the law. RCW 76.06 already states that “forest insects and forest tree diseases which threaten the permanent timber production of the forest areas of the state of Washington are hereby declared to be a public nuisance.” All owners of timberlands are responsible for controlling or eradicating these pests. If they are unable, then the DNR may use various means to address the infestation. At present DNR is reluctant to force landowners to address these infestations. The most likely reason is that most damage is found on federal forest lands and on lands managed by the DNR.

Who Is Affected by Poor Forest Health Conditions?

- Residents living in homes in heavily timbered areas
- Firefighters on the front line
- Property and timberland owners
- Taxpayers
- Trust beneficiaries such as K-12 schools, state universities, and counties with trust lands
- Elderly and those with health concerns
- Environment and wildlife

What is Being Done? – The 2004 Legislature passed SB 6144 which created a study group to work with DNR in assessing and making recommendations to the Legislature to address forest health in Washington. The group met from May through December 2004. The legislation also charged the Commissioner of Public Lands (DNR) with being the state's lead in negotiating with tribes and federal agencies in addressing forest health conditions on the lands they manage. The report required by SB 6144 was issued without public comment or public meetings which had some environmental groups believing they were left out of the public commentary process. As a result, the Legislature did not act upon the recommendations of the report during the 2005 Session and instead addressed forest health issues during the 2006 Session.

During the 2006 Session the Legislature passed SB 5179, which reinstated the Forest Health Strategy Work Group (it had expired on June 30, 2005) and directed it to hold public meetings so that public input could be gathered and recommendations made to the Legislature for a new forest health law. As a result of this work group, the Legislature passed Washington's new forest health law, SB 6141, in 2007.

SB 6141 (2007) recognized the lead role of DNR in developing a comprehensive forest health program for the state. It also established a three-tiered system to address forest health problems as they arise. The tiered system (1) encourages landowners to voluntarily manage their timber in a healthy manner; (2) allows the Commissioner of Public Lands to issue a forest health hazard warning; (3) allows the Commissioner of Public Lands to issue a forest health hazard order. Furthermore, landowners who refuse to address unhealthy forest conditions after notification by the DNR have increased liability for any fire suppression costs and/or costs incurred by the DNR to reduce the fire hazard potential on their lands.

As required in the 2007-2009 biennial budget, DNR convened a workgroup to study issues related to wildfire prevention and protection and make recommendations to the Legislature on the effectiveness of DNR's fire fighting program. A report to the Legislature will be submitted by August 1, 2008.