

News Release



USDA Forest Service
Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CHANGING LEAVES, EMERGING CONCERNS

Delta, CO., (September 10, 2007) – Colorado’s aspen trees have been referred to as “Rocky Mountain Gold” to acknowledge the change in their leaves from summer’s tranquil green to fall’s stunning yellow each year. Crisp fall temperatures, with warm days and cool nights, sunshine and changing leaves evoke many memories for Coloradoans. This is the time of year when many people venture into the forests throughout the State to look at fall colors. However, this year, visitors to the Forest will notice that there aren’t as many yellow leaves and perhaps they will note more dead and dying aspen in their favorite Western Slope color viewing locations.

This is because of a phenomenon that has become more and more evident in the forests within the San Juan, Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests and on private lands in the area as well. Named Sudden Aspen Decline (SAD), growing clumps (stands) of aspen on the Grand Mesa and in the Leroux Creek and Terror Creek drainages, north of Paonia, are deteriorating and dying in large numbers and across large areas.

Forest health in Colorado is a statewide issue. While other portions of the State are receiving funding, grants, developing industries to process fiber and working to restore forest health to large areas affected by epidemic mountain pine beetle infestations, forests on the western slope are experiencing Sudden Aspen Decline mortality. SAD is growing in size and severity and threatening current and future aspen forests, wildlife habitat, scenic vistas and viewsheds.

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“Last year, SAD was mainly noted on the San Juan National Forest and concern for the aspen was noted in the media and particularly during fall color season,” stated Roy Mask, entomologist for the

Gunnison Service Center. “This year, we have noted a large increase and expansion of Sudden Aspen Decline on the GMUG, much of which is even more severe than what was noted on the San Juan National Forest.” Mask went on to explain that while aspen death and mortality is normal in a healthy ecosystem, SAD is very concerning because it may result in the death of aspen roots, called clones. Once the root system dies then the ability for aspen to regenerate is severely limited because aspen primarily regenerates through root sprouting. This could occur on a large scale across the Forest and could significantly affect the amount of aspen wildlife habitat, scenery, and aspen-dependent species.

Sudden Aspen Decline threatens western slope habitat, scenery and economics if left unchecked and high-risk stands are not regenerated. The Forest Service is working with its Research Branch, local governments, and congressional representatives to identify treatment opportunities to limit the extent of Sudden Aspen Decline and to identify opportunities to regenerate stands in some areas to prevent SAD.

Researchers think that widespread and severe drought conditions earlier this decade caused stress in the trees, particularly the mature stands of aspen, which weakened them and made them susceptible to secondary infections and infestations. Secondary diseases and infestations such as aspen borers, bark beetles, and Cytospora canker among others, which are present to lesser degrees naturally in aspen stands, became more active and numerous which caused the further decline and mortality in the stands. However, unlike other kinds of mortality, the roots of many of the SAD-killed trees are weak which prevents regeneration of the stand and site.

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NOTE: For information on Sudden Aspen Decline, please reference the website: www.fs.fed.us/r2/fhm/, or contact Roy Mask or Jim Worrall at Forest Health Management, Gunnison Service Center, 970.642.1133 or 970.642.1166. For GMUG information, please contact Steve Marquardt at 970.874.5570. For San Juan information, please contact Mark Krabath, 970.882.6830.