Southern Pine Beetle Epidemic — National Forests in Mississippi

Our Future Forests

Our goal is the suppression of the spread of southern pine beetle spots and the protection of valuable resources, including adjacent private lands, threatened and endangered species habitat, roads, utilities and recreation areas.

We are developing a long-term restoration strategy for the four ranger districts affected by the unprecedented southern pine beetle outbreak that has destroyed tens of thousands acres of timber.

Ultimately, the strategy will provide a road map for healthier forests with more resilient species, such as longleaf pine, and provide many benefits including reduced risk of catastrophic wildfire and greater species diversity of plants and wildlife, including game animals.

Restoration efforts are more proactive and efficient in protecting and restoring natural resources, and supporting jobs and economic vitality for American communities.

The Southern Pine Beetle Epidemic

In July, Forest Health scientists advised that the southern pine beetle outbreak was unprecedented in scope with activity progressing at breakneck speed with infestations rapidly escalating in size, coalescing, and decimating whole plantations.

Surveys found more than 3,500 bug spots on the Homochitto Ranger District (southwest), Bienville Ranger District (central), Tombigbee Ranger District and the Holly Springs Ranger District (north).

Scientists believe there are several reasons for this severe outbreak including

- southern pine beetle is a cyclical outbreak species, which becomes an area-wide and aggressive tree-killer during outbreaks,
- recent unseasonably mild winters and excessively dry, drought conditions in the summers,
- an abundance of moderate to high density pine stands, including more than 100,000 acres of unthinned loblolly and shortleaf stands that are highly susceptible to infestation by the insect, and
- the inability to complete effective suppression activities in previous years.
Southern Pine Beetle Epidemic — Accomplishments

By the end of September, we treated 842 spots or 4,330 acres of bug infested timber. We cut infested trees to suppress the spread of the beetles and protect resources, including adjacent timber stands on private lands, threatened and endangered species, recreation areas, roads, and utilities.

Cutting trees helps prevent spot growth by disrupting the beetle pheromone communication system and thus their ability to effectively aggregate and mass attack new pine trees.

Ground saturation created significant challenges to suppression efforts. Because of the amount of rainfall this summer, logging crews had limited ability to operate heavy equipment.

- In July, we established an Incident Management Team and brought on retirees, off-forest detailers, and directed employees from non-affected areas to the affected forests to help manage the outbreak.
- In August, the U.S. Forest Service designated more than 500,000 acres of federal lands on the beetle infested districts as landscape scale insect and disease treatment areas, a Farm Bill classification that provides greater flexibility in mitigating infestation risk to the forest. The new designation allows us to use streamlined National Environmental Policy Act procedures to plan future projects.
- In September, the Forest Service and the Mississippi Forestry Commission (MFC) signed a Good Neighbor Authority agreement, a tool to improve forest health, including efforts to suppress the epidemic. Using this authority from the 2014 Farm Bill, the MFC may perform forest management services on National Forest System land, including identifying disease-infected trees and mapping bug spots.
- In October, we began implementing a timber salvage sale plan. We received authority to sell salvage timber using weight scales. We have packaged these as blended sales where purchasers can buy stands with southern pine beetle-infested timber and non-beetle timber within buffer areas.