

The Elkhorns Working Group Newsletter



Message from the Chair

Welcome to the 3rd Edition of the Elkhorn Working Group Newsletter. We have had a busy year. We realize the importance of our group as we see results of our work reflected in the agency plans. The Elkhorn Steering Committee has included our Vegetation Study Recommendations in the '08,'09, '10 and '11 Program of Work.

The Northern Region USFS presented the EWG with the Regional Forest Honors Award for Partnership at a ceremony in Missoula. We are proud to accept this award and receive the plaques presented to each of our members.

Our field trip to the Compton ranch allowed us to view controlled burns and weed treatments done through combined efforts of the Compton ranch and the DNRC. We thank Leah and Gene Compton for hosting this tour. The poolside dinner, hosted by

Brud Smith at the Smith Ranch in Boulder, was a relaxing end to a good day. Dave and Barb Baum made certain we were all well fed with their delicious barbecue. Our most recent field trip was to Warm Springs Creek to view the Warm Springs Habitat Enhancement Project with a presentation on the Birds and Burns research by Vicki Saab. We also looked at the Shingle Butte logging project and had a fine lunch at the Strawberry Lookout.

Ed Finstad, Bud Smith, Jerry Bodmer and Mark Lincoln, four of our valuable members have resigned. We thank them for their hard work and diligence with the Elkhorn Working Group. They will be hard to replace and we will miss them at our meetings.

We welcome our newest members, Joy Lewis and Vickie MacLean to the Elkhorn Working Group. Thank you.

Tom Williams

The Red Sea—Pine Beetles in the Elkhorns

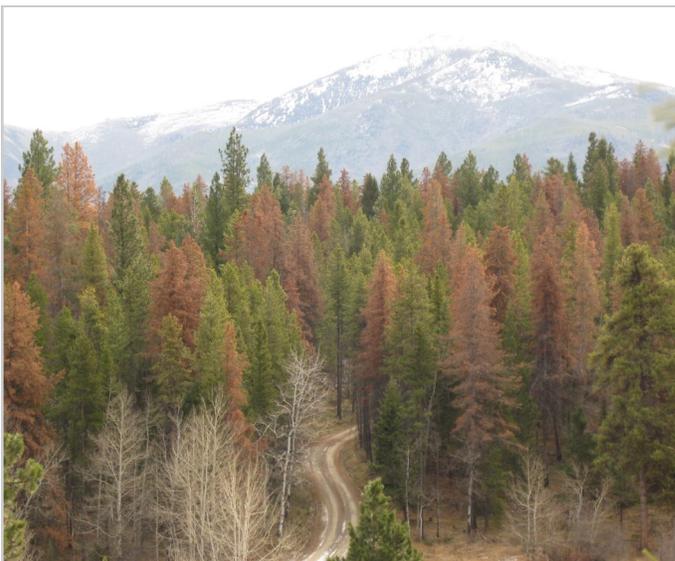
One issue that has been very much on the minds of the Elkhorn Working Group in 2009 is the beetle infestation epidemic in the National Forest. In an attempt to educate ourselves about the problem, we specifically wanted to know what percentage of the Elkhorns has been affected and what are the mechanics of the spread of the disease.

Duane Harp, USFS, attended our Sept. meeting and gave the group an overview of how the beetle infestation has affected the Helena National Forest.

As a result of Duane's presentation there was a motion to form a committee to monitor not only the progress of the infestation but also the agencies response to it.

We were fortunate at our Oct. Meeting to have Amanda Millburn (Forest Silviculturist) and Sharon Scott (Vegetation Program Leader) give a more detailed presentation on the scope and extent of the infestation. The information

regarding biology, current conditions, treatment options and agency response was very helpful to the group.



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Special points of Interest:

Meetings are held the 2nd Thursday of the month. The public is always welcome!



**Pitch Tubes
Evidence of Mountain Pine Beetle**

Insect Biology—What is at Work Here?

Most of the red trees we are seeing in the Elkhorns were killed by the mountain pine beetle. Understanding how the mountain pine beetle works is critical to developing any type of response.

This aggressive bark beetle affects ponderosa, lodgepole, whitebark and limber pine. It is a native insect that plays an important role in the ecosystem but can cause high levels of mortality. Mature beetles emerge from infested trees typically in July, and fly to infest new trees by laying eggs. Beetle larvae over-winter under the bark of infested trees. When the insect emerges the beetle will generally go to the nearest susceptible tree, but is capable of flying several miles to find a new host. Initial infestation is often indicated by pitch tubes on the bark mid- to late-summer

and infested trees appear green for up to one year. This insect, like all bark beetles, communicates via chemical signals (pheromones) to call for the help of other beetles to attack a tree. Once a tree is fully infested they emit another pheromone to send the beetles away.

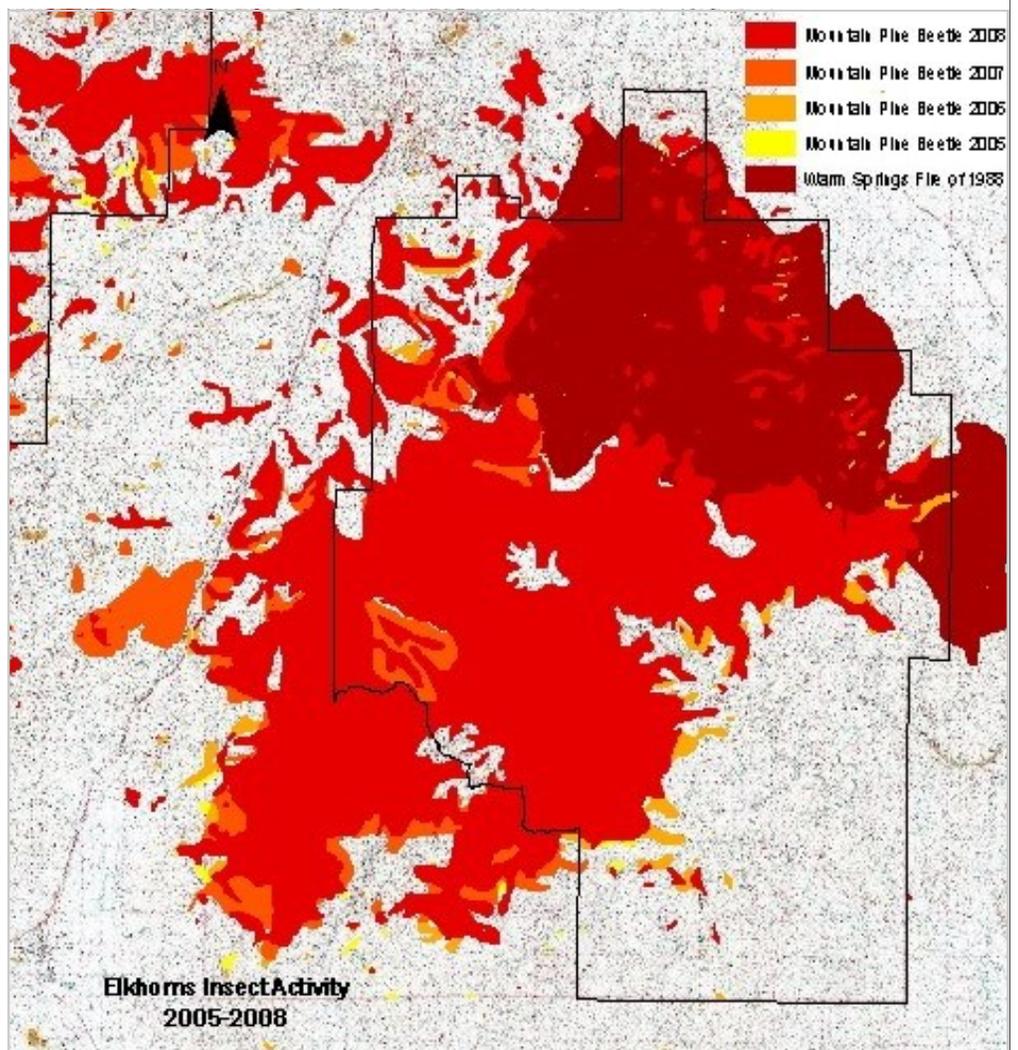
The mountain pine beetle is tiny, about the size of a grain of rice. Tree death is caused by the feeding action of beetle larvae which “girdle” the cambium, and is aided by the blue-stain fungi that the beetle introduces to the tree. This insect prefers very dense, shady stands, because the microclimate is conducive to their survival and communication. The pine beetle is first attracted to the largest trees available (more cambium in larger trees) but is also attracted to weakened trees and can kill trees as small as 5" in diameter.



Current Conditions of Mountain Pine Beetle in the Elkhorns and Forecast

Historically mountain pine beetle infestations have caused large, landscape-level mortality; an epidemic typically continues until the beetle runs out of food or weather conditions cease to be conducive to their survival. Weather conditions that regulate the beetle population include very cold temperatures for extended periods in the winter; late spring or early fall frosts; and wet spring/summers.

There is evidence suggesting that due to the current warm dry climate conditions the pine beetle is active at higher elevations, higher latitudes and for longer durations than seen previously in this century. With this background information it is easy to understand why 40% of the Helena National Forest has been affected as reported by 2008 detection flight data. Because of how quickly the beetles can move from tree to tree it is expected that 90% of pine over 5" in diameter will be killed. It is important to accept that we cannot stop a beetle epidemic in progress. Even with limitless funds and labor it would not be possible to remove every infested tree, to spray every susceptible tree, or to thin every forest.



Mountain Pine Beetle Treatment Options and Expectations

With this in mind the Helena National Forest's response is as follows:

1. Safety response: It is expected that the red trees will start to fall 3-5 years after being killed; approximately 10-20% will fall each subsequent year and all are expected to fall within 10-15 years. This necessitates a plan to cut and remove all hazardous trees along roadsides, trails, power lines, landlines, administrative sites, and recreation sites Forestwide.

2. Allowing cutting near private land: Private landowners upon issuance of a permit would be allowed to cut infested but "still green" timber on the National Forest adjacent to their land.

3. Large scale treatment options: Create a mosaic landscape of size and age classes of pine across the landscape by using combinations of thinning, sanitation/salvage, or prescribed burning. This would eventually create conditions



where only some stands are susceptible to the beetles at any one time instead of on continuous landscapes. Chemical treatment is currently deemed to have little or no utility in the forest due to its prohibitive cost and minimal effectiveness.

4. Overall management considerations: What do we want our regenerated forests to look like? What is the fire risk of the red needled trees and the trees on the surface after they fall? What role do the infected trees play in the health of the each affected watershed? How will tree mortality affect wildlife habitat? Is it possible to harvest the trees and realize economic value for our local communities? How do wilderness, roadless or otherwise protected

areas within the Elkhorns fit into a plan to address the beetle epidemic?

5. Public outreach, education and involvement: Public involvement will be crucial during the analysis and implementation of proposed projects and to this end the Forest Service has developed website materials, hand-outs and a bug information line.

A Forest for Every Classroom

The Elkhorns Working Group is pleased to announce our partnership with a *Forest for Every Classroom* (FFEC), a professional development program for teachers focused on place-based education. The Elkhorns and their surrounding communities have been chosen as the first national replication site for a Vermont-based program in large part because of the EWG's efforts in developing collaborative partnerships in the Elkhorns. The program was kicked off in the spring of 2009 and the final workshop is scheduled for January of 2010. Members of the EWG participated in presentations on various topics. Jim Posewitz presented a perspective on the history of wildlife conservation; Tom Williams shared his perspective as a local rancher who relies on public lands for his livelihood. This program is aligned with our Communication and Education Recommendations to:

Implement a comprehensive educational program to (among others):

- Describe and explain plant succession, the ecology and biology of the area, and social and cultural aspects.

- Discuss the benefits of open space and maintaining land in private agricultural ownership rather than subdivisions and development, etc.
- Explain to the public the purpose and structure of the working group.

For more information on this program go to:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/ffec/index.shtml>



Tom Williams, local rancher, out on the range with the FFEC teachers

Elkhorn Working Group Members

Darrell Baum
Dave Baum
David Brown
Quentin Kujala
Tom Lythgoe
Denise Pengeroth
Jim Posewitz
Sam Samson
Joy Lewis
Brud Smith
Nelson Wert
Tom Williams
Renee Johnson
James Crichton
Carolyn Lewis
Sundi West
Vicky MacLean

For more information, contact Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Helena Area Office at 495-3260. Also, if you're interested in learning how to become a member, contact an EWG

Elkhorn Notes

EWG is excited to announce a website we developed in conjunction with FWP to obtain public information on the location of wildlife, primarily elk, to aid in trend counts conducted by FWP and to assist in determining wildlife distribution in seasons when the trend count is not being conducted. Go to: fwp.mt.gov/hunting/

For more information on the Elkhorns, and the Elkhorns Working Group visit the website!

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/helena/elkhorns/>

In the Spotlight

"In recognition of your dedication and commitment to collaborative problem solving in the Elkhorn Mountains. Your ability to come together and work towards the common goal of sustaining healthy ecosystems in the Elkhorn Mountains serves as a model for others." Regional Forester

In 2008 the Elkhorn Working Group was recognized for our collaborative, solution-oriented efforts in the Elkhorns when we received the Forest Service Chief's Partnership Award. On June 17, 2008, EWG members David Brown, Daryl Baum, and Jerry Bodmer traveled to Missoula to



Left to right Tom Tidwell, David Brown, Daryl Baum and Jerry Bodmer

receive our award from the Forest Service's Regional Forester Tom Tidwell.

Other Activities

EWG has been busy this past year and a half implementing our recommendations on the Elkhorn Vegetation Study. Since our last newsletter, we presented our recommendations that we developed to date to the public in March of 2008 at the Colonial Inn in Helena. The event was well attended and the recommendations well received.

We also finalized our recommendations on the Elkhorn Vegetation Study. These recommendations help minimize conflicts between wildlife and domestic livestock on rangeland habitats through inclusion of private landowners in elk management. The recommendations are as follows:

Address the mandate set forth in 87-1-323 MCA that "the Department (FWP) shall consider the specific concerns of private landowners when determining sustainable numbers pursuant to this section". Information and issues that this prototype system should involve:

- Obtaining information from landowners in a manner that will make them willing to furnish information that will result in their concerns being addressed.
- Identifying problem hunting areas where landowners or access problems are preventing adequate game population management.
- Obtaining information from landowners on numbers of wildlife in seasons when

trend count is not being done and whether current hunting seasons are resolving the problem.

- Obtaining information from landowners and others as to location of wildlife just prior to trend count to aid in the trend count.
- Developing a reasonable avenue for obtaining information on the above issue.
- Obtaining systematic information from others as to location of wildlife in seasons other than hunting.
- Obtaining better feedback from hunters and landowners as to the success of special management or damage hunts.
- Obtaining information as deemed necessary for the FWP, Federal Agencies, and EWG to work collaboratively in determining the appropriate trend count objective.

EWG also facilitated development of a conifer colonization strategy for the Elkhorns in keeping with our *Conifer Encroachment Recommendations*. We provided funding to hire a facilitator to work with personnel from the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. The Strategy is in its final phases of completion and will provide guidelines for management areas of conifer expansion in the Elkhorns.

Well, we've run out of room for now! We'll catch you up on all of our other activities in our next newsletter. Happy holidays!