

## **Pine Beetle Epidemic**

The current mountain pine beetle epidemic in Colorado's north-central mountains is giving us a vivid glimpse of the constantly shifting natural renewal process. The combination of aging lodgepole pine forests and several years of severe drought has allowed the mountain pine beetle epidemic to grow to a scale not previously recorded in Colorado. Over 425,000 acres of Colorado forests are infested with mountain pine beetle.

Mountain pine beetle, an aggressive native insect, is the primary culprit in the death of millions of pines in Colorado and across the West. Like other bark beetles, mountain pine beetle plays a natural role in the life cycle of forest ecosystems, helping to precipitate the change from old stands to young.

The beetles carry a bluestain fungus that infects their chosen trees. The fungus spreads through and clogs the tree's water-transporting vessels while beetle larvae eat the tree's inner bark. The fungus and the larvae's activities interrupt the tree's nutritional system, causing the tree's death.

The State Forest management strategy is focused on removing standing dead trees, infested green trees and susceptible host material, and protecting high-value trees with preventive insecticide sprays. However, once an insect outbreak has reached epidemic proportions, it is very difficult to slow its expansion. Ultimately, the focus must be shifted to managing our forests for future desired conditions and forest health, rather than managing the bark beetle itself.