

Meade County Commission

1300 Sherman Street - STE 212
Sturgis, SD 57785
605.720.1625

www.meadecounty.org

For Immediate Release: Friday, September 7, 2012
CONTACT: Alan Aker at 605-390-6515

Meade County Gets Forest Service Approval to Stop the Spread of Mountain Pine Beetles

Meade County Commission chair Alan Aker announced Friday that the county has begun cutting trees infested with the Mountain Pine Beetle (MPB) on Forest Service lands in the county. The agreement, one of very few in the nation, allows the county to cut down infested trees and cut them into short chunks, which kills the beetles and prevents infection of neighboring trees.

The pine beetles have devastated forests in the central part of the Black Hills and are rapidly spreading to new areas in the forest. "The beetles have moved into Meade County," Aker said, "and these control efforts are coming at the best possible time: before the problem explodes and gets out of hand." Aker said Meade County has had a crew working in the forest for a few weeks locating and marking infected trees. "We're seeing mostly small pockets of beetle trees, maybe 5-10 infested trees, over a pretty extensive area, with just a few areas where there are more than a hundred infested trees. The areas where we're finding the most beetles are Deadman Mountain, Veteran's Peak, and west of Piedmont."

"The time to tackle these outbreaks is when they're still small. We're going to get a really big bang for the buck. For every tree we cut this year, we're probably saving 5 trees that would have to be cut the next year." Aker said the long-term solution for the problem is to thin timber stands to make them less attractive to the beetles, but that the Meade County cutting program will buy time for the forest service to implement that long-term strategy. "We're grateful for the concern and action the forest service is showing on this issue. I think we have a good chance to win this battle in Meade County."

Aker said that if the county program is successful, Meade County's forests will stand out from much of the rest of the Black Hills by having a large number of mature trees. "Fifty years from now, if people notice that the forest is filled with a lot more big, beautiful ponderosa pines in Meade County compared to the rest of the Black Hills, people might wonder why, and the answer may be the work we're putting into this right now."

Aker said Meade County's commitment to saving forests from MPB infections has deep roots. "Prior county commissioners played a key role in saving the Beaver Park area from being wiped out by MPB. It was a great example of what can happen when counties get involved. That's a beautiful area today, with a lot of biological diversity. We avoided a devastating wildfire by controlling the MPB problem."

Meade County has dedicated over \$90,000 to the project and is accepting donated funds and labor for the work, and anticipates a multi-year effort. "This explosion in MPB numbers will cycle down as they run out of habitat and as we kill them before they hatch. I'd like to keep this program going until the cycle winds down."

Meade County's agreement with the forest service does not permit the county to remove the trees from the woods for any use, or to use any mechanized equipment larger than a chain saw. "I'm ok with that," Aker said. "There isn't a market for these trees anyway, and with our small-scale outbreaks, chainsaws are the most cost-effective way to get these trees on the ground and cut into chunks." Cutting the trees into 2-foot chunks helps dry the wood out, which kills the beetle. The forest service agreement allowed cutting to start September 1, and that's the day cutting started in Meade County. "We know that the sooner in the season we get these trees cut, the higher the percentage of beetles which will be killed."

Aker and the forest service are hosting a public tour of MPB cutting Friday at 9 a.m. The tour gathers at the store in Nemo, South Dakota, then travels roughly 4 miles to an MPB cutting site where Aker, who is a logging contractor himself, will be doing some cutting. To volunteer or donate to the Meade County project, visit the www.meadecounty.org website and look for the banner titled, "The Bug Stops Here", or stop in at the Meade County commission office in Sturgis.