



As a trained forester and someone involved with natural resource issues throughout the state of Colorado, it is frustrating to me to routinely see our forests not being actively managed, as I know they should. While we are so fortunate to have so many involved tree farmers managing their private lands, the same can't be said for our federal lands. Sadly, of the 24.4 million acres of forest land in Colorado, 65.5% falls under federal ownership and management.

Over the past decade, Colorado's federally owned forests have been and continue to be threatened by beetle infestations and vulnerability to catastrophic wildfire. According to the state, spruce beetle outbreaks increased to 409,000 acres in 2015, bringing the grand total up to more than 1.5 million acres since 1996. Though areas affected by the mountain pine beetle has dropped to its lowest level since 1996, the decline is largely due to the death of suitable host trees during previous years of the outbreak. Since 1996, approximately 3.4 million acres of lodgepole, ponderosa and five-needle pines have been impacted by the mountain pine beetle outbreak.

Unfortunately, over the past two decades regulations, litigation, and federal "analysis paralysis" have reduced federal timber harvests by over 90 percent statewide. For the 2015 fiscal year, Colorado's national forests sold 545,983 ccf, which is still below the current capacity and demand within the state. These lower harvest levels contribute to increased wildfire fuel loading and an elevated risk of insect and disease attack.

As a result of harvest levels being lower than demand, the number of active primary wood products facilities has decreased from 133 facilities in 2002 to less than 40 today. Six businesses have closed just in the last 3 years. The majority of remaining facilities operate under capacity, decreasing their efficiency and overall ability to sustain markets swings. Colorado currently imports over 90% of forest products from other states and countries. Unfortunately, the decline in federal timber harvests has resulted in higher unemployment and poverty in rural communities, while threatening funding for county services and education. Not only has these closures cost jobs and harmed Colorado's economy, the loss of forest products infrastructure could hamper future efforts to remove beetle kill trees and excess timber on overstocked and fire-prone forests.

If you are just as frustrated as I am with this issue, I encourage you to join the Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities (HFHC) Coalition. HFHC is a non-profit, 501(c)(4) organization that supports the need for active, sustainable forest

management to provide stable county revenues and more jobs for our rural communities. HFHC supports balanced policies that promote rural economic opportunity while also maintaining the many benefits we have come to expect from our forests, including recreation and diverse wildlife populations. For more information, please visit [www.healthyforests.org](http://www.healthyforests.org) and sign up.

HFHC is currently working very hard to find a long-term, stable funding system for wildfire suppression costs. As many of you know, over half of the US Forest Service's budget is spent on wildfire suppression. Making matters worse, the agency consistently exhausts its firefighting budget and is forced to transfer funding from non-fire budgets to cover the shortfall. In 2015, the Forest Service transferred, or "borrowed" a record \$700 million. What does that mean for those of use that use and enjoy our national forests? It means that projects such as trail work and pre-commercial thinning don't get done because the National Forests just don't have the money. This troubling trend is expected to continue as wildfires become larger and more severe. Fixing "fire borrowing" is a step in the right direction, but that will only treat one symptom of the problem.

Active forest management and restoration is one of the few effective, long-term solutions for improving the health of our forests and rural communities. The primary factors limiting active forest management in Colorado and Wyoming are litigation and the cost and time required for the Forest Service to satisfy exhaustive analytic requirements driven by conflicting regulations and past and current litigation.

Additionally, serial litigation and appeals have had a major impact on the Forest Service's ability to propose and implement needed projects in Colorado and Wyoming. In fact, nearly three-quarters of all forest management projects proposed by the Forest Service and prepared with traditional National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Environmental Assessments and Environmental Impact Statements in Colorado and Wyoming were appealed or litigated. Many of these projects are delayed or stopped entirely, most frequently on procedural grounds, and Forest Service employees are forced to compile paperwork for court hearings rather than plan additional projects.

If you care about your public lands, which I know you do, please consider joining the HFHC Coalition. Help be part of the solution.

Sincerely,

Molly Pitts  
Rocky Mountain States Director  
Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities  
[www.healthyforests.org](http://www.healthyforests.org)