

Todd George

Owner

Rafter J Bar Ranch Campground

Testimony on "Impact of the Mountain Pine Beetle Epidemic in the Black Hills"

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My parents, Tom and Joan George, bought the Rafter J Bar Ranch in 1970 as a small campground with big dreams of turning it into a larger destination style full service resort. Today, we have grown to 180 campsites with 27 cabins on 150 acres of land. My parents poured their hearts and souls into making the Rafter J what it is today. After my father's passing in 2004, my mother, sister Laura and I continue to run the business with big aspirations and dreams. This year, we reached a milestone in completing a large infrastructure project to upgrade electric, water and sewer systems, making it possible for a substantial expansion of campsites, cabins and lodge in conjunction with many recreational activities. Three years ago, our plan included the addition of 70 cabins, up to 100 more full service RV sites and numerous recreational projects. Architectural plans on our first phase have been completed and a few of the recreational projects are now in place. They include a new playground system, basketball and volleyball court.

Unfortunately, the remainder of our projects are on hold due to the looming beetle epidemic which threatens our very existence. This summer, the Pennington County Sheriff's office asked us to develop an evacuation plan in the event of a wild fire that explodes out of control. As you look at the brown needles of dying trees surrounding our property on all sides, it speaks volumes to the magnitude of the crisis. For decades, we have dealt with small pockets of beetle infected trees and generally considered them a nuisance. Typical years would include the removal of 10 to 25 trees on the property. But the recent explosion of pine beetles in our area,

forced us to develop a capricious diversion from commercial expansion to planning for a worst case scenario of total destruction of the property. This year, we were forced to divert money from the completion of the first phase of our recreation complex. The money was spent on an aggressive and costly campaign to spray important trees around the Rafter J to protect against the beetles. The trees must be sprayed on an annual basis, requiring dedicated funding for years to come. last fall, we also logged about 1000 newly infected trees from the campground, which required an arduous six months of work from loggers, a local tree service company and my employees.

As the beetles kill trees and leave a wake of destruction, it makes it increasingly likely for a quick spreading wild fire to destroy residential homes, vacation homes, businesses, and even threaten local communities. Nearby memorials, Custer State Park and area attractions could be devastated by a wild fire in the blink of an eye. I commend the US Forest Service, State Forestry, local fire departments and loggers of our area who work endlessly to protect the citizens of the Black Hills with limited resources. Until the deleterious effects of the pine beetle epidemic are fully dealt with, we will continue to take a defensive, fight for survival approach in running this business. All expansion plans at our business must remain on hold until the uncertainty of this potential catastrophe is resolved.