

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Monday, July 11, 2011

[PERMALINK](#)

CONTACT: [Jill Strait](#) or [Spencer Pederson](#) or [Crystal Feldman](#)

202-226-9019

Field Hearing Examines Need for Long Term Solution to Fight Pine Beetle Epidemic, Prevent Wildfires

WASHINGTON, D.C. – On Sunday, the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands held a [field hearing](#) in Hill City, South Dakota on the “*Impact of the Mountain Pine Beetle Epidemic in the Black Hills.*” Subcommittee Chairman Rob Bishop (UT-01) and Representative Kristi Noem (SD-At Large) attended the hearing and heard from government officials, local industry and private land owners who testified to the ravaging effects of the mountain pine beetle on forests throughout the West, and the resulting impacts on local businesses and the tourism industry.

“The Mountain Pine Beetle has turned most of the Black Hills, not to mention pine forests throughout the West, into a sea of dead and dying trees. Sadly, decades of the federal government’s failed forest policies have in part allowed this native insect to reach epidemic proportions that have impacted over four million acres across South Dakota, Wyoming and Colorado alone. A sharp decline in forest management has left these forests in an extremely unnatural and unhealthy state, the result of which has been a feeding frenzy for the beetles but only dead trees for the rest of us,” **said Chairman Bishop (UT-01).** *“This epidemic was decades in the making and will not be curbed overnight, but it is important to ensure that our federal land managers have the flexibility to implement forest management projects and utilize our partners to maintain infrastructure that is necessary to ensure the long term health and productivity of the land and natural resources that have been entrusted to our care.”*

“The mountain pine beetle is an epidemic that threatens our forests, watersheds, wildlife habitat, scenery, recreation and tourism, and increases the potential for catastrophic forest fires. ... Healthy forests are important to the livelihood of millions of people in the West and critical to economic recovery. In South Dakota, the forests are a source of tourism, energy generation, recreation, and a reliable water supply for the region. It is imperative that we don’t allow the forests to be destroyed by a preventable disaster,” **said Rep. Noem (SD-At Large).**

Since 1997, mountain pine beetles have reached unprecedented levels, infecting nearly 4 million acres of national forest across the Black Hills, Colorado and Wyoming. Mountain pine beetles, native to the western forests of North America, specifically contaminate and kill a variety of pine trees throughout the West. In the Black Hills National Forest, 384,000 acres – one third of the 1.2 million acre forest – have been lost to the mountain pine beetle since 1998 and the rate of infestation continues to double each year. Groves of dead trees

left in the wake of the beetle are susceptible to large scale wildfires leaving neighboring homes, businesses and power lines at risk.

All of the witnesses agreed that a long term solution is needed to quell the pine beetle epidemic, a solution that requires a multi-faceted eradication plan, and reduce the increasing threat of large scale wildfires due to deteriorating forest health. **Craig Bobzein, Forest Supervisor at the Black Hills National Forest**, gave an overview of the methods the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has implemented to control the outbreak and reduce the risk of a catastrophic forest fire. *“Commercial thinning, cutting and taking out beetle infested trees, and prescribed burning have reduced the susceptibility of the forest to catastrophic fire and bark beetle attacks,”* stated Bobzein. However, he acknowledged, *“the beetles continue to spread to new areas faster than we can respond.”*

Raymond Sowers of the South Dakota Department of Agriculture affirmed that this is the largest pine beetle outbreak in recorded history, which dates back to 1890s. According to Sowers, 95 percent of the mountain pine beetle infestation is located on federal lands: *“With 90 to 95 percent of the infested trees located on federal lands under the administration of the Black Hills National Forest, our [state] efforts have been unable to address the larger problem. The dramatic increase in mountain pine beetle-infested acres witnessed last year was due primarily to new infestations on properties adjacent to U.S. Forest Service lands.”* Therefore, federal, state, and local governments must work together to intervene and actively control the spread of mountain pine beetles within the Black Hills.

Jim Sherrer, a private land owner in the Black Hills, spoke of the difficulty of owning property contiguous to U.S. Forest Service land. Sherrer owns 166 acres of “multiple use land” neighboring the Black Hills National Forest. His testimony outlined the Administration’s “gross neglect” of federal lands which has resulted in the destruction of large areas of the Hills *“and placed those of us in close proximity to their property, in significant danger from the inevitable catastrophic fires that surely will occur.”*

Mountain pine beetles thrive in densely populated, overstocked forests. **Jim D. Neiman, Vice President and CEO of Neiman Enterprises, Inc**, discussed the benefits of proactively thinning the forests to prevent and control pine beetle outbreaks. According to Neiman, *“proactive thinning reduces the potential for mountain pine beetles and fires, puts people to work, saves money for the federal government, and forest products companies can produce American wood products for American consumers.”* However, proactive management and proper maintenance of the forests requires regulatory flexibility so that land managers have the tools necessary to do their job.

The tourism industry has taken a large hit due to deteriorating forest health caused by the mountain pine beetle. Many South Dakota businesses depend on the health of the forests to draw customers for activities such as camping, fishing, hunting and boating. **Todd George, owner of the Rafter J Bar Ranch Campground**, said that he has seen firsthand the damage the mountain pine beetles have done to the forests and his business. Proper maintenance of his campgrounds is expensive and the unsightly pockets of dead trees have deterred some customers from returning. *“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,” said George.

###

<http://naturalresources.house.gov>

[Facebook](#) | [YouTube](#) | [Twitter](#)