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City to remove trees killed by pine beetle

The mountain pine beetle may be wreaking havoc on Montana forests, but city parks officials are cautiously optimistic about their chances of protecting Missoula's urban forest from the destructive insects. The City of Missoula's Park Operations staff will begin removing beetle-infested trees in urban parks in coming weeks. But the real challenge will come when they turn to managing the beetle on City-owned conservation lands, where the problem is more pervasive.

"Our initial inventory in City parks is promising," says Urban Forester Ben Carson. "Right now, we estimate only about seven percent of pines located in parks need to be removed due to pine beetle infestation."

The City's adopted approach for treatment of the mountain pine beetle infestation is three-pronged, according to Carson. First, infested trees will be felled and completely removed. Secondly, densely forested areas will be thinned to reduce stress on individual trees and inhibit the insects from moving from tree to tree. The last step of the process is to try to protect "legacy trees": larger, highly desirable, uninfested trees. Parks crews will treat these trees with pheromone packets, which confuse the beetles and discourage them from infesting a tree.

Parks and Recreation crews will be removing beetle-infested trees in several city parks, including the Clark Fork Natural Area, the Rattlesnake Greenway, Jacob's Island, Moose Can Gully, Highland and Marilyn parks. Beginning this week, as weather permits, crews will be removing trees in these and other city parks. "We'll be removing three types of trees," Carson says. "Trees that are red and obviously dead from beetle kill, trees that are still green but have been significantly infested by the beetles, and small-diameter trees which are crowding larger, healthy trees."

The estimated cost of the removal project is \$18,000 and will be absorbed by Parks and Recreation's operating budget, but the extra expense may impact other projects, according to Parks and Recreation Director Donna Gaukler.

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"Addressing the mountain pine beetle issue has become a priority that will further stretch the Department's ability to manage other concerns with the urban and conservation lands forests," Gaukler says. "Our pruning cycles, planting and other critical components of a desirable and healthy forest will be delayed until funds become available. The staff is actively seeking funds through partnerships and grants to deal with mountain pine beetle, but we cannot afford to wait."

On conservation lands, like Mount Jumbo and the upper Rattlesnake Greenway, the mountain pine beetle infestation is more widespread than within neighborhood parks. City officials expect to have a pine beetle mitigation plan in place for conservation lands early in 2010. "The scope of the problem is much larger on Mount Jumbo than in town and will require more funding and more time to solve," says Conservation Lands Manager Morgan Valliant. "Beetle activity on Mount Jumbo is significant, and there are numerous pockets of infestation. We'll certainly be seeing more dead, red trees this coming summer as green trees that are currently infested die," he said. City-owned land on Mount Sentinel and the North Hills is primarily grassland and will not be as significantly affected by the beetle. Most of the forested areas on Mount Sentinel are owned by UM, the USDA Forest Service, and private landowners.

Parks and Recreation's pine beetle project is restricted to trees on City-owned or managed land. The Montana Department of Natural Resources has a program to assist private landowners at <http://beetles.mt.gov/> or 542-4300.

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