

## *Climate change, logging collide*

The Bismarck Tribune

September 28, 2021 Tuesday

Copyright 2021 The Bismarck Tribune, a division of Lee Enterprises All Rights Reserved

**Section:** A; Pg. 1

**Length:** 869 words

**Byline:** MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

### **Body**

---

CUSTER CITY, S.D. - Looking down a hillside dotted with large stumps and nearly devoid of trees, a pair of retired U.S. Forest Service employees lamented logging policies they helped craft to deal with two harbingers of *climate change* -- pine beetles and wildfires.

Timber production dramatically ramped up two decades ago in the Black Hills National Forest along the South Dakota-Wyoming border, as beetles ravaged huge expanses of forest and worries grew over wildfires.

The beetles left, but the loggers haven't - and they're now felling trees at twice the rate government scientists say is sustainable. That means the Black Hills forests are shrinking, with fewer and smaller trees.

Timber sales from federal forests nationwide more than doubled over the past 20 years, according to government data. In Washington, D.C., Republicans and Democrats alike have pushed more aggressive thinning of stands to reduce vegetation that fuels wildfires.

But critics of federal forest management say that in their fervor to do something about *climate change*, officials are allowing the removal of too many older trees that can actually better withstand fire.

In the Black Hills, stands of century-old ponderosa pines were thinned over the past two decades, then thinned again. In some areas, most of the remaining older and larger trees are being cut, leaving hillsides almost bare.

"Eventually you're not going to have any big trees on the whole forest," said Dave Mertz, who worked as a government natural resources officer overseeing Black Hills logging until retiring in 2017. "The timber industry is pulling the strings now. The Forest Service has lost its way."

Across the western U.S., more trees have been dying as *climate change* dramatically alters the landscape and leaves forests more susceptible. Wildfires, insects and disease are the top killers, researchers say.

A sweeping government review of forest health surveys since 1993 found that the rate of trees dying increased this century and outpaced new growth in all eight states examined - Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming. Timber harvested from Forest Service lands over the past two decades also increased.

In the Black Hills, those two trends have collided. With more trees being logged and even more killed by beetles and fires in recent years, government scientists say the forest can't grow fast enough to keep up.

The timber industry and allies in Congress are pushing back against that conclusion. Timber company representatives predict dire economic consequences if forest managers sharply reduce harvest levels. And they say wildfires and beetle outbreaks would get worse.

## Climate change, logging collide

One of the region's seven mills closed in March, eliminating 120 jobs in Hill City, South Dakota. Owner Neiman Enterprises said a recent slowdown in timber sales meant it wouldn't have enough logs.

"These companies aren't tech startups. They are multi-generational family companies that want to be there for the long term," said Ben Wudtke, director of the Black Hills Forest Resource Association of saw mills and logging companies.

To counter growing havoc from western wildfires, Biden's administration wants to double the forest acreage thinned or treated with prescribed burns to 6 million acres annually - bigger than New Hampshire.

One method to reduce fire risk is to remove dense stands of small trees and thick underbrush that accumulated for decades as wildfires - a natural part of the landscape - were suppressed.

It's expensive, labor-intensive work, and there's little market value in small trees. When sworn in this summer, Forest Service Chief Randy Moore said combating climate change will require making it worthwhile to harvest smaller trees, such as using the vegetation as biomass to generate electricity.

"It doesn't pay for itself, and we don't have markets that seem to be increasing quickly enough," he said.

The service's former deputy chief, Jim Furnish, criticized the agency as too focused on timber production and too slow to react to climate change, to the detriment of the forest.

There are signs of change under President Joe Biden, including the administration's move last month to end large-scale commercial logging of old-growth trees in Alaska's Tongass National Forest.

But other projects that include old-growth removal are pending, including in Montana's Kootenai National Forest along the Canada border, the Kaibab National Forest just north of the Grand Canyon in Arizona and Idaho's Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest.

"The Forest Service's approach to date has been to attack this as a management problem: 'We need to cut more trees,'" Furnish told The Associated Press. "You can't cut your way out of this problem."

Moore, the agency's chief, acknowledged the warming planet was forcing changes, but said he hoped to find a "sweet spot" between the environment and industry - while removing enough vegetation to reduce wildfire risk. In the Black Hills, officials said they would consider the latest science alongside economic impacts as they seek to make logging sustainable.

"We need the industry to help us," Moore said, referring to climate change. "It's not really about timber sales or cutting large trees."

## Classification

---

**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Subject:** FORESTS & WOODLANDS (91%); FIRES (90%); FOREST FIRES (90%); FORESTRY & ENVIRONMENT (90%); PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT (90%); PUBLIC LANDS REGULATION & POLICY (90%); WILDFIRES (90%); FOREST RESOURCES MANAGEMENT (89%); FORESTRY & LOGGING SECTOR PERFORMANCE (89%); FORESTRY WORKERS (89%); INSECTS & ARACHNIDS (89%); PUBLIC LANDS (89%); SERVICE WORKERS (89%); TIMBER TRACT OPERATIONS (89%); MANAGERS & SUPERVISORS (78%); NATURAL RESOURCES (78%); SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY (78%); TRENDS (78%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY

## Climate change, logging collide

(78%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (78%); SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY (70%); STARTUPS (61%); FAMILY COMPANIES (60%)

**Organization:** FOREST SERVICE (84%)

**Industry:** FORESTRY & ENVIRONMENT (90%); FORESTRY & LOGGING (90%); LOGGING INDUSTRY (90%); AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY, FISHING & HUNTING (89%); FOREST RESOURCES MANAGEMENT (89%); FORESTRY & LOGGING REGULATION & POLICY (89%); FORESTRY & LOGGING SECTOR PERFORMANCE (89%); FORESTRY & LOGGING TRADE (89%); FORESTRY WORKERS (89%); SAW MILLS (89%); TIMBER TRACT OPERATIONS (89%); SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY (78%)

**Geographic:** SOUTH DAKOTA, USA (92%); WYOMING, USA (92%); COLORADO, USA (79%); DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, USA (79%); IDAHO, USA (79%); MONTANA, USA (79%); NEVADA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%)

**Load-Date:** September 28, 2021