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Mountain Pine Beetle Epidemic in Willmore Exacerbated by Decades of Fire Suppression

Vivian Pharis, AWA Board of Directors

The government is undertaking a program of cutting, burning and baiting in northwest Willmore Wilderness Area to stem the spread of mountain pine beetle. Willmore Wilderness Park north of Jasper is a corner of the province that is normally neglected in government spending. Its access roads have potholes large enough to drown a horse, its trails are dangerously eroded and overgrown, and its trail signs have disappeared. But this year a part of the Willmore west of the Smoky River is getting attention and funds.

The funds do not come out of Community Development's meager budget for parks, however, but out of the lucrative Forest Protection budget of Sustainable Resource Development. The reason for spending is the tiny, native mountain pine beetle blowing into border areas from large infestation sites in B.C., and its potential threat to Alberta's commercial forests.

Although the beetle population in B.C. is considered to have peaked and is now in serious decline, Alberta was invaded here and there last year by flying adults. It is these infected trees that are being hunted out from the air, cut and burned, in the hope of stemming further fly outs when the larvae change into adults and move on.

According to a government news release (July 13, 2005) the infested trees are widely scattered over densely forested areas of the northern Sheep and Muddywater river basins. Crews are being sent in by helicopter to destroy infected trees and set pheromone baits. There have been at least 3500 infected trees.

Eradication operations are occurring throughout Alberta's protected areas that border B.C.—places like Willmore Wilderness Park and our mountain national parks. They have all become ripe targets for unnaturally large infestations of the mountain pine beetle due to decades of fire suppression that has left thick, congested forests. Historically, natural fires swept through portions of our boreal forest in 25-300 year cycles, thinning them and leaving them more able to resist devastating pest attacks.

While the national parks recognize that the pine beetle is a native species, they are under pressure from Alberta to control it on park land. In order to do this in a more natural and long-term way, both Banff and Jasper are implementing fairly aggressive prescribed burning programs. Such programs are also in the works for Willmore Wilderness Park, where AWA is assured that logging will not be allowed to substitute for burning programs.

However, the message is a little mixed on the exact plans for the area. Rob Harris, the SRD information officer for the area, told AWA that five or six prescribed burns are planned in the near future west of the Smoky River, including an 11,000ha burn in the Avalanche Creek – Pauline Creek area on the B.C. border that would go towards headwaters of Holmes River in B.C. He assured us that B.C. was supportive of the plan.

Andy Van Imschoot, from Community Development's Parks and Protected Areas, told AWA that fires were planned in Meadowland Creek with a moderate sized burn this fall. Community Development's Assistant Deputy Minister John Kristensen said he had okayed a small fire in Meadowland Creek and was not sure about B.C.'s comfort zone on burning in the area. Apparently Community Development is





under pressure from some locals around Grande Cache who would like to see massive cutting to reduce fire risk.

AWA is supportive of a scientifically based approach to prescribed burning throughout Willmore Wilderness Park in order to return its forests to a more natural condition and to enhance wildlife habitat in critical portions of this area that have been transformed by years of fire control to less productive habitat types.

Forest Protection's huge budget of nearly \$100 million should be redirected from fire protection for commercial forests, to returning our forests to a healthy state of mixed species composition and ages, where they are able to resist catastrophic wildlife and disease and insect infestations without human interference.

For more information about the ecology of the mountain pine beetle in Alberta see Dr. Mary Reid's article "Can we share the forest with mountain pine beetles?" in WLA, August 2001.

AWA's position statement on forest pests can be found on our website under Resources/Positions.

