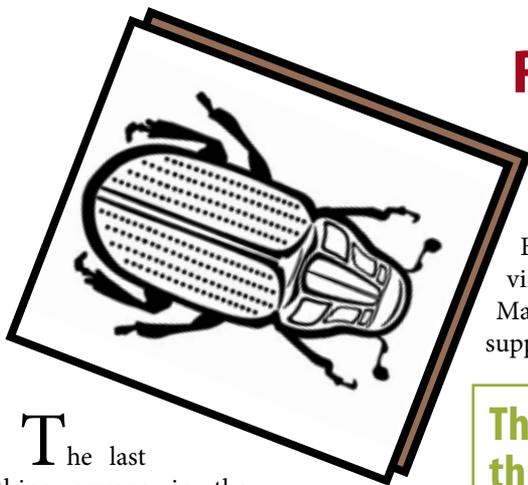


ROUND TWO: BUGS 1, FORESTS 0

By Robin Brunet



The last thing anyone in the Interior wanted to see in late October was the sight of trucks laden with beetle-infested spruce trees bound directly for mills. Forestry-dependent communities that had weathered the devastation caused by the mountain pine beetle now face another assault, this time from the spruce beetle, an insect that's targeting the green timber left untouched by its voracious relative.

Observing the trucks too was Heather Wiebe, Omineca Spruce Beetle Project Manager for the provincial government, working out of Mackenzie. "The mid-term timber supply we rely on is being threatened

fire," says Wiebe. "If we don't act now and decisively, it could become a major problem, and this we can't afford considering the damage already inflicted on our forests by the mountain pine beetle epidemic." Indeed, data from Victoria

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by another potentially major beetle infestation," she says.

However, as unsettling as trucks carrying infested wood may have been to observers, it was the beginning of a concentrated effort to nip the problem in the bud. "At present, what we're doing is the equivalent of putting out a small

shows a 35 percent increase in damaged forest in 2016 over the year before.

Concern over the troublesome spruce beetle populations kicked into high gear earlier this year, when a provincial survey of spruce stands in the Omineca region north of Prince George showed its population to have swelled



Photo courtesy of Minister of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations



Photo courtesy of Minister of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations

The spruce beetle is somewhat stouter so they can't move over large geographical areas by being picked up by air streams like the mountain pine beetle.

from 76 square kilometres of timber in 2013 to 1,560 square kilometres. In total, 210,000 hectares have been damaged by the bug in the Omineca region (up from 156,000 in 2015), and over 137,000 hectares have been damaged in Prince George.

Prince George, Vanderhoof, Mackenzie, and Fort St. James have been identified as the most affected communities. There are 15 sawmills, two pulp mills, and three pellet plants operating within this broad geographical region—Canfor, Conifex, Sinclair Group Forest Prod-

ucts, and BC Timber Sales are the biggest players.

While the spruce beetle has certain characteristics that make it easier to eradicate compared to the mountain pine beetle, its destructive potential is no less severe: an infestation ending in the late 1990s in Alaska had spread to 900,000 hectares, and in Colorado over 150,000 hectares are currently infested. “The situation in BC is that we’re right at the brink of the spruce beetle population rocketing,” says Wiebe.

Tim Ebata, the provincial forest health officer for the BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations (MFLNRO), says the beetle’s potential for devastation is exacerbated by “the timber supply shortage, especially in Prince George,” where the allowable annual cut—the largest in the province—is expected to drop from the current 12.5 million cubic metres to 6.2 million cubic metres in 2020.

Biologists blame the onslaught of the spruce beetle in 2016 on what they call an “acute stress event”, i.e.: warm winters that enable the beetles to complete their development over a one year period in-

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stead of two, combined with drier summers that weaken the spruce trees and make them more vulnerable to attack.

And the infestations are insidious. “The beetles are hard to detect because they gather on the underside of downed timber,” says Wiebe. “When they jump into the standing trees, the trees’ needles don’t turn a telltale brown until a year or even 18 months later—by which time we can be multiple generations into the outbreak.”

With time being of the essence, MFLNRO allotted \$1 million in new funding for an aggressive control program earlier this year; detection efforts were increased, a government task team was assembled, localized working groups with government and licensees were mobilized, and a public advisory committee was struck.

Although Sara Cotter, Canfor’s Prince George-based planning coordinator, declined to be interviewed about the control program by *Truck LoggerBC* (deferring instead to MFLNRO representatives), in October she told local media, “We’re in much more complicated areas: there are a lot of other non-

timber values in areas where we’re seeing the spruce beetle. Patch cuts, strip cuts, clear cuts, we’ve been considering ways to practice alternative silviculture strategies so that we can deal with [the infestation] in some areas.”

Unlike the mountain pine beetle, which doesn’t exist in downed timber, the spruce beetle loves to reside in blowdowns.

Wiebe agrees that extracting the affected wood “is a real balancing act in which wildlife conservation, old growth management, riparian retention, and fishery sensitive watersheds all have to be considered.”

Discussions have even taken place about the viability in some areas of cable logging, a system that hasn’t been used in decades. “The trouble with that is there are very few cable operators left in the Interior,” says Ebata. “However, nobody has rejected the prospect of cable logging yet. If industry can make it profitable and the right people are found, it might happen.”

In late October, when the spruce

laden trucks were attracting attention as they made their way out of Mackenzie, Wiebe took time out to assess the control program’s progress. “Helicopter surveys determined where the beetles have been, and now we have people in

the forest looking for the trees with living beetles within them,” she says. “So far we’re finding a lot of these ‘green attacked’ trees, which is troubling because the Prince George/Mackenzie TSA and the Lakes district are areas of mid-term timber supply.”

At this early stage of the battle, it’s tempting for biologists and licensees to regard the infestation as a series of pros and cons. On the con side, and very much instilling a sense of urgency among licensees, is that the shelf life of spruce beetle killed trees is suspected to be only three to five years compared to the 15 year shelf life of a mountain pine beetle killed tree. “Licensees want



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When spruce beetles jump into standing trees, the trees' needles don't turn a telltale brown until a year or even 18 months later.

to reach those stands as soon as possible and get them directly to the mills," says Ebata.

Another factor potentially on the con side is weather: at 16° Celsius, the beetles can take flight—which means everything from hauling to milling has to be conducted with a close eye on the temperature. "It's a narrow window," says Ebata.

On the pro side, the spruce beetle is somewhat stouter than the pine beetle, the latter of which moves over large geographical areas by being picked up by air streams. "That doesn't happen with the spruce beetle, thank goodness," says Wiebe.

Another plus is something that, if done properly, could turn the battle decisively in the licensees' favour. "Unlike the mountain pine beetle, which doesn't exist in downed timber, the spruce beetle loves to reside in blowdowns, so in April licensees will be cutting down large diameter, 80-160 year old spruce trees and putting them in the shade, where they'll literally draw in beetles from an 800 metre radius," says Wiebe.

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onset of cold weather, these 'trap' trees will be stripped of the infested bark and milled. "Surveys have determined where the 'trap' areas should be, and the process of falling the trees will be done during the course of a normal forestry program," says Ebata.

While Ebata is careful not to suggest that success is a fait accompli, he can't

summer, so we're crossing our fingers," says Wiebe.

And even if the weather behaves, logistical challenges remain. "It won't be easy for mills that have been set up for small diameter pine to accommodate large diameter spruce," says Wiebe. The larger spruce logs could also affect the equipment needs of contractors.

predation, and a lack of susceptible host trees," she says.

As for the long term, Staffan Lindgren, a retired University of Northern BC professor, recently told delegates to a beetle summit in Prince George that different approaches to forest management must ultimately be taken to end bug outbreaks sooner. "We need to remember the beetles are always there," he said. "They may not always kill trees, but we need to act as if they're going to very soon."

Lindgren believes the government and licensees need to focus on what the beetle requires to survive: "If you create a monoculture, [the bugs] have a better situation and can do better; stand structure can be incredibly important."

Surely we have learned from the years of trying to manage and ultimately failing to ward off the devastation of mountain pine beetle. Hopefully, this time around we can succeed, simply because we must.▲

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help but compare BC's efforts to that of the Americans. "The Alaskan infestation is huge, and one of the reasons it's become such a problem is the infestations have occurred in national forests, where getting a cutting permit can easily take several years; here, we can obtain a cutting permit within a season—which has helped us enormously in this particular situation."

Still, the MFLNRO's carefully laid plans could easily go awry. "Wildfires of the magnitude we've seen in recent years could completely derail us next

Ebata agrees that challenges abound. "Yes, a lot of reconfiguration will be required; but one thing I'm confident about is that the BC forest industry is very adaptable, and all of the companies affected by the spruce beetle are determining the best ways to adapt head rigs and re-tool operations."

For her part, Wiebe is cautiously optimistic about the outcome. "If all goes well, we'll have mitigated the infestation, and the beetle population will be reduced to the point where it can be held in check by climatic conditions,

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