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PINE BEETLE AND WILDLIFE TREES IN THE OKANAGAN-SIMILKAMEEN WORKSHOP, PENTICTON, BC, MARCH 26-27, 2008

The resource and ecological fallout of the pine beetle infestation is enormous. While all attention is focussed on the lodgepole pine forests of the Central Interior, pine beetles (both Western and Mountain) are now attacking the ponderosa pine (Py) forests of the Southern Interior. Although ponderosa pine forests are of limited extent and poor commercial value, they host remarkably high biodiversity values, as well as a suite of endangered species. The federally listed white-headed woodpecker, found only in the South Okanagan-Similkameen, is totally dependent on old-growth Py snags for cavity nesting, and on Py seeds for food. Several other bird species at risk, including the flammulated owl, Lewis' woodpecker, pygmy nuthatch, Williamson's sapsucker, and Cassin's finch, preferentially use ponderosa pine snags for nesting.

Early highgrade logging in the Okanagan-Similkameen valleys removed many of the large veteran trees preferred by cavity nesters and raptors. Subsequent fire suppression created overly dense forests, eliminating the semi-open habitat many of these species prefer. And now the pine beetle will bring its own set of effects to these unique dry, low-elevation forests, and that was what the 45 workshop participants met in Penticton to discuss.

The workshop, which was co-hosted by FORREX and the BC Ministry of Environment, featured some very knowledgeable and talented speakers, including:

Mike Fenger, biologist and co-author of *Wildlife and Trees in British Columbia*
Ponderosa Pine Ecosystems, Bark Beetles, Humans and Wildlife Trees

Lisa Scott, biologist and regional co-ordinator of the Wildlife Tree Stewardship Program
Wildlife Trees of the Okanagan-Similkameen and the Species that Depend on Them

Heather Rice, forest health technician with the BC Ministry of Forests and Range
Pine Beetle in the Okanagan-Shuswap Forest District

Dr. Kathy Martin, forest bird ecologist at University of British Columbia
Biodiversity Maintenance and Conservation in Post-Epidemic MPB Forests in Interior BC

Fred Marshall, professional forester and wildlife danger tree assessor
A Landscape Overview of MPB/WPB and Ponderosa Pine Occurrences

Ellen Simmons, pine beetle outreach co-ordinator with BC Ministry of Environment
The South Okanagan-Similkameen Pine Beetle Outreach Pilot Project

Citation—

Gayton, D.V. 2008. Pine beetle and wildlife trees in the Okanagan-Similkameen Workshop, Penticton, BC, March 26-27, 2008. Summary. FORREX, Kamloops, B.C. URL: http://www.forrex.org/program/con_bio/PDF/Workshops/Pine_Beetle_Workshop/Summary.pdf



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The workshop participants, including private landowners, consultants, naturalists, local officials, and others, wrestled with the complex and multi-layered issue of wildlife and trees in the South Okanagan-Similkameen. The workshop included a short field tour to a Py forest in the initial stages of beetle attack. The site was instructive, manifesting many of the issues of Southern Interior dry forests: early highgrading, forest ingrowth, fuel accumulation, firewood cutting, overgrazing, drought, beetle attack, cavity nests, standing dead trees in various stages of decay, and early falldown of some beetle-attacked trees. Participants were also alerted to the host of insects other than pine beetles that utilize live and dead trees.

In a very engaged and intense wrap-up session, speakers and participants collectively drew some tentative conclusions:

- Beetles and fire are natural components of dry forest ecosystems, and we need to change our management strategies to work with—instead of against—these elements, while striving to avoid the catastrophic outbreaks and fires we are experiencing now.
- Availability of suitable wildlife trees is probably not a current limiting factor for the current bird species of concern in the South Okanagan-Similkameen; other factors such as food sources, habitat fragmentation, and integrity of migratory habitats are of greater concern.
- Many of the beetle-killed trees in the Okanagan-Similkameen appear to be falling at a rapid rate, sometimes just a few years after their death. This could create a shortage of suitable wildlife trees in the future.
- Cottonwood and aspen trees make excellent alternatives to ponderosa pine and lodgepole pine wildlife trees, but much of the riparian habitat they are found in has been eliminated.
- Many of our cavity-nesting bird species of concern are at the northern edge of their range, and their genetic resources are very valuable. If these species do not find suitable habitat in the Okanagan-Similkameen, they cannot “move south” since the southern habitats are already occupied.
- The presence of woodpeckers is a good indicator of landscape level biodiversity.
- While we work to preserve our rare birds, we also need to ensure that common native birds remain common.
- Ponderosa pine forest management in the Okanagan-Similkameen should emphasize the retention of existing large veteran trees, as well as planning for them in the future.
- More public education on the importance and safety issues of wildlife trees would be valuable.