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Bill Ritter, Jr.
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GOV. RITTER CREATES FOREST HEALTH COUNCIL

On Feb. 12, Gov. Bill Ritter created the Colorado Forest Health Advisory Council, a multi-agency action group that will coordinate and lead efforts to address the mountain pine beetle epidemic and other threats to Colorado's 22 million acres of forestland.

"Colorado's forests are vital to our environment, to our communities, to our economy and to our overall quality of life," Gov. Ritter said. "But our forests are at risk, and one of the biggest risks is the mountain pine beetle. This epidemic has decimated more than 1.5 million acres of mature lodge-pole pines over the past decade and could wipe them out in another three to five years.

"Many people have been working on this issue for years," Gov. Ritter added. "The time has come for a unified, coordinated and aggressive action plan that enlists all stakeholders as collaborative partners in this fight. The time has come for state government to lead that effort. The Colorado Forest Health Advisory Council will bring together local, state, federal and private interests to identify and implement short-term actions and long-term forest health strategies."

Harris Sherman, executive director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, and Jeff Jahnke, state forester and director of the Colorado State Forest Service, will co-chair the Council. The 24-member group also will be composed of city, county, state, federal and private stakeholders and representatives from the woody biomass industry, water suppliers, conservation groups and sportsmen.

The Council will immediately develop a short-term action plan that:

- Implements priorities identified in Community Wildfire Protection Plans;
- Encourages and supports establishment of Forest Improvement Districts;
- Coordinates expansion of economic incentives to reduce forest treatment costs;
- Implements landscape-scale stewardship projects; and
- Continues the Community Forest Restoration Grant Program.

The Council also will develop long-term strategies for sustainable forest health, addressing:

- A statewide vision to protect communities from fire and restore forest health;
- Guiding principles for the design and implementation of restoration projects;
- A method to monitor and evaluate existing projects and share lessons learned; and

- Ways to increase public awareness about the relationship between healthy forests and clean drinking water, quality wildlife habitat, safe communities, strong economies, and recreational and tourism values.

The Council will report back to the Governor and Legislature annually. If recommendations require legislative action, those recommendations will be submitted by Oct. 1 prior to the January start of the legislative session.

“Many healthy-forest efforts are already underway,” Gov. Ritter said. “This Council will not reinvent the wheel. It will build a better wheel, a faster wheel that maximizes these efforts. This Council is not another study group. It is an action group.

“This is not just about managing a crisis; it’s about getting ahead of it. It’s about being proactive as we consider the future of our forests 25, 50, 100 years from now.”

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