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FOREST SERVICE

Researchers: Reduce Black Hills timber harvest by half



Marc Heller, E&E News reporterPublished: Friday, March 26, 2021

Timber harvesting at the Black Hills National Forest. Black Hills National Forest/Flickr

Timber harvests in the Black Hills National Forest must be cut by at least half for long-term sustainability, agency researchers said in the latest volley over how best to manage the 1.2 million-acre forest.

The Rocky Mountain Research Station **finding** reinforces a 2020 draft report that said a combination of wildfire, disease, insect infestation and historical timber harvesting had rendered the forest incapable of maintaining the current harvest goal of 18.1 million cubic feet of timber a year.

Ponderosa pine is the main commercial tree species in the forest, which is mostly in South Dakota with a section across the Wyoming line.

The final assessment highlights a difference of opinion within the Forest Service — where the regional office has stuck by higher timber targets — and is likely to attract attention from lawmakers, including Sens. John Thune (R-S.D.) and John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), who've asked the agency not to reduce the targets. The agency scheduled an April 7 webinar for interested parties to discuss the issue.

The current harvest level "is not a sustainable option," the researchers said in the report, adding that levels between 7.2 million and 9.05 million cubic feet appear more sustainable.

"Sustainable" is a term subject to interpretation, they said, and the researchers defined it generally as net growth in the forest exceeding harvest levels and tree loss due to other causes.

Researchers analyzed several scenarios for timber harvest levels, including the current goal and various reductions. Looking at potential losses to wildfire, disease and other causes, they determined that 18.1 million cubic feet of timber couldn't be sustained in any case. Over time, they said, sharply reduced timber harvests — along with some forest thinning and prescribed burns — could help the forest recover to more ambitious production.

Climate change is a big variable, they added, because scientists aren't sure exactly what the impact will be on the Black Hills forest over the coming decades. But if the wildfire season begins earlier and ends later, they said, that would reduce the forest's ability to regenerate, forcing a longer period of smaller timber harvests.

"History shows that allowing the forest to recover after large disturbances provides opportunities to adjust future harvest levels. Also, tending of young forests can promote recovery and produce sawtimber volume more quickly," the study said.

The debate over timber in the Black Hills comes as the region recovers from a nearly decadelong infestation of mountain pine beetles, which attacked the national forest from 2000 to 2017. The forest typically faces an outbreak every 20 years or so, according to the Forest Service.

It's also an example of the Forest Service's sometimes delicate task in balancing the multiple uses for the land it oversees, as science, politics and business compete for priority. A spokesman for Thune said the senator's office has yet to receive a reply to its latest request that the Forest Service leave the timber target alone ([E&E Daily](#), March 4).

The Black Hills Forest Resource Association, representing the timber industry, warned against reducing harvest levels and played down aspects of the report. The study didn't cover the entire area of the forest available for harvest, Executive Director Ben Wudtke said.

"There is a more than 100-year track record of forest products companies and the Black Hills National Forest working together, finding success in mitigating wildfire hazards, pine beetle mortality and other factors that would negatively affect carbon sequestration efforts," Wudtke told E&E News. "If implemented, the harvest levels in the final report would completely throw away our ability to find those successes moving forward."

Environmental groups — including the Center for Biological Diversity — have drawn attention to researchers' findings and complained that the Forest Service appeared to be disregarding their study at the end of the Trump administration.

Withering industry

Reducing harvest levels would go against a recommendation last year from the Black Hills Resource Advisory Board, which arrived at a different conclusion from looking at some of the same data the researchers had analyzed.

The Black Hills forest supervisor last September had also endorsed lower timber targets ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 24).

The advisory board, representing industry and environmental groups and local officials, recommended maintaining timber harvests at 18.1 million cubic feet until at least 2027. Among other details, the advisory board's recommendations noted that about 2 million cubic feet of standing ponderosa pine sawtimber is located in areas not included in its report and could be used to help meet harvest targets.

Pre-commercial thinning — which is conducted in preparation for future timber sales — would help the forest maintain harvest levels but hasn't been practiced enough in recent years, the advisory board said. While the thinning should be increased, it generally follows timber harvest levels, the board's chairperson, Danielle Wiebers, told the acting Black Hills forest supervisor in an October letter detailing the board's recommendations.

"It is important to recognize that funding for pre-commercial thinning would very likely decrease for the BHNF if the commercial timber sale program decreases," Wiebers said.

Although the Forest Service researchers emphasized climate change as a factor in forest regeneration, Wiebers didn't mention the issue and said the advisory board had determined that tree mortality probably wouldn't veer from levels seen from 1962 to 1999 "for the foreseeable future."

As the deliberations at the Forest Service continue, the Forest Hills logging industry shrinks. Neiman Enterprises Inc. announced Monday that it's closing a mill in Hill City, S.D., which has a population of 1,000. The company said it employs 120 people at the mill.

"I never thought I would see the day when we would be out of options to keep all our facilities running," Jim Neiman, the company's president, said in a news release.

Despite high lumber prices, he said, "the problem here is purely a lack of timber available for purchase in the Black Hills and we rely on the Forest Service for approximately 80 percent of our supply."