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News Release

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Forest Service prepares for second year of severe bug outbreak

JACKSON, Miss., May 23, 2018 – The U.S. Forest Service announced today that early signs indicate national forest lands will face a second consecutive year of a severe southern pine outbreak that threatens to damage tens of thousands of acres of pine forests in Mississippi.

Forest Service scientists found large numbers of the beetles in traps located on the Homochitto Ranger District in southwest Mississippi and the Bienville Ranger District in central Mississippi. “In the next few weeks, after we conduct additional aerial surveys, we expect to have a clearer picture of the overall level of the outbreak, but it doesn’t look good,” said Jim Meeker, an entomologist with the Forest Service.

Last year, the Forest Service found nearly 4,000 spots of infestation by southern pine beetles on the Homochitto, Bienville, Tombigbee, and Holly Springs Ranger Districts. The southern pine beetle, a native insect, is the most destructive forest pest in the South, both in economic and ecological impacts. In the absence of southern pine beetle suppression, large-scale pine mortality occurs, destroying endangered species habitat, recreation opportunities, timber, and other property values.

The southern pine beetle is a cyclical outbreak species, which becomes an area-wide and aggressive tree-killer during outbreaks. Scientists believe there are several reasons for the severe outbreak, including weather patterns favorable for beetle success (while hampering suppression efforts) over the last several years as well as an abundance of moderate to high density pine stands that are highly susceptible to infestation by the insect.

Forest workers are surveying infested timber stands to identify priority treatment areas and cutting infested trees – creating buffer zones between the infested and healthy stand areas to control the outbreaks. “Our priorities are to stop the bugs from spreading to private forest lands and red-cockaded woodpecker clusters,” said Carl Petrick, Acting Forest Supervisor for the National Forests in Mississippi. The red cockaded woodpecker is federally listed as an endangered species.

Forest protection efforts are focused on a strategy where the infested trees are cut and removed as part of timber sales. To date, the forest has had 16 sales and sold 140,647 CCF of timber. Cut and remove is the preferred and most effective measure to suppress the spread of southern pine beetles.

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“We plan to increase the scale and pace of our restoration efforts in forest areas damaged by the southern pine beetle infestations. Ultimately, this will lead to healthier, more resilient forests that are made up of more species-appropriate tree stands,” Petrick said.

The Forest Service continues to work closely with its state partner, the Mississippi Forestry Commission in responding to the southern pine beetle outbreak. Landowners with concerns about potential southern pine beetle activity on their property should contact their Mississippi Forestry Commission Area Forester. To find the Area Forester for each county, visit www.mfc.ms.gov/offices and click on the appropriate county. For additional information about southern pine beetles, go to www.mfc.ms.gov/SPB-Prevention.

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