



H.R. 9999: (Rep. Pettersen), “Mountain Pine Beetle Coordination Act”

Congressional Testimony, Colorado State Forester Matthew M. McCombs

September 16, 2026

Chair, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Matt McCombs, and I serve as Colorado’s State Forester and Director of the Colorado State Forest Service. I appreciate the opportunity to be here before the committee again and I want to begin by thanking Congresswoman Brittany Pettersen and Congressman Joe Neguse for their leadership in introducing the Mountain Pine Beetle Coordination Act. This legislation reflects how mountain pine beetle outbreaks actually unfold, across ownership boundaries, and recognizes that we must work together to detect beetle activity, respond where we can make a difference and manage together the wildfire hazards associated with significant tree mortality.

Mountain pine beetles are a natural part of pine forests in Colorado and across the western United States. They play an important ecological role in culling the forest of unhealthy and dying trees. These native insects are always present in pine forests, usually at low levels the forest can tolerate, and outbreaks occur every so often under the right conditions, when there are ample trees for beetles to consume and drought and warm temperatures weaken the defenses in those trees from attack. When populations explode and beetles decimate large swaths of forests, then an outbreak can become epidemic.

The most recent mountain pine beetle epidemic occurred in Colorado from the late 1990s through 2013, affecting 3.4 million acres of forests. The beetles killed up to 90% of trees in some lodgepole pine forests in Summit, Grand, Eagle and Routt counties during that time. If you’ve driven through those parts of Colorado, you’ve seen what that looks like. First, the hillsides turn red. Then they fade to gray. Over time, many of the dead trees fall and pile up like jackstraws across the forest floor. Then, in 2020, the East Troublesome and Cameron Peak fires burned across hundreds of thousands of acres. Extreme drought, severe fire weather and heavy fuel loads comprised of beetle-killed trees combined to produce explosive fire behavior that challenged conventional containment.



Over the past few years, the Colorado State Forest Service, USDA Forest Service and our local partners have monitored an uptick in mountain pine beetle activity in the lower elevation ponderosa pine forests on the Front Range of Colorado. These forests largely escaped the epidemic that ended in 2013 and are chock full of trees susceptible to attack from mountain pine beetles. This summer we have watched pockets of brown, beetle-killed trees expand in forests full of ponderosa pines weakened by some of the hottest and driest conditions on record in Colorado.

As Colorado's state forester, this outbreak is especially concerning noting it's spreading in Colorado's most populated areas where there is already very high wildfire risk. These areas have experienced a rapid expansion of the wildfire-urban interface and have an abundance of homes, communities, recreation areas, reservoirs, highways and other critical infrastructure in and around where we expect significant tree mortality to occur. Thus, this outbreak has the potential to negatively impact public safety, water quality, outdoor recreation and in many ways hundreds of thousands of Coloradoans' fundamental quality of life.

The good news, however, is the outbreak is early and we have the opportunity to mitigate the risk to our forests, communities and water supplies. We've learned from our recent experience, and we have a clearer understanding of what we can do now to lessen the impacts of this unwelcome event. To do this, we must address the problem at the scale at of the problem, across entire landscapes, and work together across boundaries. Mountain pine beetles don't know if the tree they are attacking is on federal, state or private land, so our solutions must involve coordination across all lands and ownerships.

The Mountain Pine Beetle Coordination Act recognizes this reality and encourages our partners at the USDA Forest Service and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to continue working alongside the state to monitor outbreaks, plan projects and treat forests where beetle-killed trees pose a significant risk, and to increase our ability to utilize or dispose of beetle-killed trees in ways that lower the overall cost. In Colorado, we embrace this shared stewardship approach to forest health and wildfire, exemplified by the Ponderosa Mountain Pine Beetle Task Force launched by Governor Jared Polis to take on this emerging issue. This bill builds off that effort and aligns with what we know works for improving forest health and reducing wildfire risk – collaborative, proactive, cross-boundary solutions.



I also want to emphasize that other states are experiencing the same challenges we are facing in Colorado. Many of our neighbors could share similar stories of recent outbreaks of mountain pine beetles and other forest insects, spurred by warmer, drier conditions, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak in support of my fellow state foresters. United through the National Association of State Foresters, we share a common goal to conserve and protect America's forests and reduce wildfire risk on all lands, across public and private boundaries alongside our federal partners.

I am grateful to Congresswoman Pettersen, Congressman Neguse and this Committee for prioritizing solutions that reflect the realities on the ground and strengthen our collective ability to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk. This bill represents a cooperative approach to addressing the top forest health issue for Colorado and other states across the west – one that recognizes and embraces “working together” as the default as we face down the myriad challenges facing forest managers today.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the Mountain Pine Beetle Coordination Act, and I look forward to any questions from the committee.