

Kenai Peninsula Borough

Planning Department – Land Management Division

MEMORANDUM

TO: Charlie Pierce, Mayor

THRU: Melanie Aeschliman, Planning Director *MA*

FROM: Marcus Mueller, Land Management Officer *MM*

DATE: June 15, 2021

RE: Spruce Bark Beetle brief

The impacts of Spruce Bark Beetle have reached a critical stage in the Kenai Peninsula Borough. Many many property owners are affected and must take action on the very near term to address direct and indirect hazards of standing dead trees. Concerns are high around property damage, wildfire risk, slash handling, mitigation costs, and future forest conditions.

Correspondingly, local agencies are experiencing rapidly growing levels of demand and their own sets of response issues. For example, slash disposal is at an unprecedented rate within the municipal Solid Waste streams leading to sites becoming choked with slash. Budgetary gaps exist where calls for service are outside of normal scopes. At this point several new lines of service are predictable, such as hazard tree removal from rights-of-ways, public lands, and geographically distributed slash management.

While spruce bark beetle mapping has been conducted through Alaska Division of Forestry annual aerial detection surveys which confirms beetle impacts on large sections in the Kenai Peninsula Borough, a more detailed assessment and mapping that is essential for land managers to act upon has yet to be conducted. More particularly there is a high priority need for remote sensing of stand types that can be used with field data to be translated into specific treatment prescriptions or other forestry prioritization and decisions.

Guiding a community through a major forest change takes its own kind of investment. In the 1990's the Kenai Peninsula Borough had many successes working with landowners, utilities, roads, solid waste, industry and a variety of partners to address a major spruce bark beetle event on the southern Kenai Peninsula. Many lessons were learned. Today the landscape situation is very similar, though the location has shifted, and many more private properties are involved, and the timber markets are less certain. Many of the type of responses that were used in the 1990's are relevant today, and the Kenai Peninsula Borough has the advantage of its past experience.

Today it is evident that the spruce bark beetle impacts are severe and far ranging, and actions must be taken to protect our communities and to preserve the health of our forests into the future.

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The Kenai Peninsula Borough has been actively engaged in sizing up the current beetle kill impacts on KPB lands, KPB operations, as well as on a community-wide level. Borough staff have reviewed information and established a network of contacts relevant to developing operational plans. In mid-april the administration submitted a federal request through our Senators Murkowski and Sullivan, and Representative Young, for \$35million in federal support for an array of measures. The measures include:

- Inventory/ Impact Assessment of Beetle Kill Areas
- Public Information
- Slash Management
- Assistance to Private Property Owners
- Salvage Harvest on KPB Lands
- Technical Treatments in Critical Public Areas
- Road & Utility ROW Hazard Tree Removal
- Innovation, Infrastructure, and Industry Investments
- Wildland Fire Response Capacity
- Reforestation
- Forest Management Planning

In order to prepare for possible funding, or to pursue alternative funding sources, the administration has authorized the use of residual spruce bark beetle funds to immediately bring on three project development positions:

- 1) Operational Planner-Project Coordinator
- 2) Public Engagement & Grants Specialist
- 3) Forester

The Operational Planner-Project Coordinator will be assigned the role of developing shovel ready project planning so that funds can readily be put into action, including the ability to stand up an effective organization for administering program objectives.

The Public Engagement & Grants Specialist will have two parallel roles as the name suggests. Public engagement will take the form of generating means to link property owners with useful informational tools in addressing beetle kill and to keep the public informed of the borough actions, and to host meetings and gather feedback important to informing program direction. The grants element of this position will focus on identifying and securing grants, and providing grant administration necessary to accomplish program objectives.

The Forester will be responsible for developing a forest management plan focused on beetle kill treatment on KPB land. The forester will determine inventory measures and treatment prescriptions and will prepare timber sales, reforestation and other contracts.

The initial term of these positions is estimated to be six months based on available funding with anticipation of extension based on success in receiving grant funds.