



DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

ADMINISTRATION

3200 East Highway 34
c/o 500 East Capitol Avenue
Pierre, SD 57501-5070
Phone: (605) 773-3478
Fax: (605) 773-3194

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Contact: Michael Winder, SD DOC Communications & Information Manager

State prison inmates on front line of Mountain Pine Beetle Fight

(Pierre, S.D.)- State prison inmates got a first-hand look this winter at the damage the mountain pine beetle has caused in the Black Hills and an opportunity to do something to limit that damage in the future.

More than one-third of the Black Hills National Forest – over 400,000 acres – has been infested by mountain pine beetles. The Department of Corrections (DOC) became involved with the beetle battle when Governor Dennis Daugaard announced the Black Hills Forest Initiative, an effort involving leveraging federal, state, and private resources to address the issue, last fall.

The DOC was involved as part of a Joint Powers Agreement with the state Department of Agriculture and Department of Game, Fish and Parks (G,F & P).

A crew of seven minimum-security inmates and one crew supervisor from the Rapid City Minimum Unit has worked since January in Custer State Park to cut down beetle-infested trees and “chunk” them, cutting the trunks of the trees into two-foot sections. Cutting the infested trees and chunking them into smaller sections kills the beetles, preventing them from attacking new trees in late spring. All inmates and the crew supervisor are trained in chainsaw operations and repair.

“Thanks in part to the mild winter weather, the inmate crew made tremendous progress with this project,” said Darwin Weeldreyer, DOC Director of Community Services. “The crew was able to treat nearly three thousand infested trees during our time on the project. The crew performed very well and the department appreciates the opportunity to be a player in this endeavor.”

Inmate crews also work on various fire suppression projects throughout the year. An inmate crew has been thinning timber near the City of Deadwood since September 2009 to help with fire mitigation efforts. Inmates are also assigned to assist G, F & P with a variety of projects to help manage lands under their control.