

NEWS RELEASE

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State, federal forest resource managers getting creative over firewood issue

DURHAM, N.H.—State and federal forest health managers across the Northeast, Midwest and mid-Atlantic are going to unusual lengths lately to get people to leave firewood at home.

In forest stand management, the tools of choice are often insect traps, pheromones, insecticides and bug spray. But this time the tools are more often brochures, posters, Web content, media interviews and the like. That is because they are not exactly trying directly to catch a certain bug. Instead, they aim to catch human attention, in fact millions of people's attention – and deliver an important message—"Don't Move Firewood". By doing so, they hope to slow down the human-caused spread of invasive insects and diseases.

How well they communicate the firewood issue could make a big difference in forest health years down the road.

"Insects naturally spread only a few miles a year," said Maine Forest Service Entomologist Charlene Donahue. "But insects and diseases on firewood in someone's vehicle can move 65 miles or more an hour."

The crux of the firewood problem involves invasive species. They are defined as those species that are non-native to the ecosystem and whose introduction can harm the environment, the economy and even human health. Studies show moving firewood long distance can dramatically speed up the spread of invasive species, including insects and diseases. The financial impact from invasive species infestations in the United States is about \$138 billion per year.

Donahue said the firewood issue is a very different kind of forest health problem requiring a very different approach for managers.

"In the past people came to us individually and told us something was killing their trees," said Donahue. "Now we have to figure out ways to get the message out to millions of people. It's something we don't have expertise in."

"With this issue, it's more about trying to develop tools that will change people's behavior. It is a different kind of outreach effort for us. Developing posters, T-shirts, bookmarks, trade show exhibits, doing talk shows, we're doing all kinds of things we never had to do before," she said.

Unusual problems sometimes require unusual tools and remedies. Unlike many more common forest concerns involving one problem insect or disease, this major forest health issue involves many species. It also has a decidedly human factor: people moving around harmful bugs and diseases on or in firewood.

What makes this situation unusual is that these front line forest health managers are not public relations professionals or communications experts. They are entomologists and foresters, people who prefer to spend their time deep in the woods looking at trees and insects. Developing communications tools or doing talk shows are some of the *last* things they would like to do.

The U.S. Forest Service Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry (NA) works with a number of state agencies from Maine to Minnesota to provide a diverse range of firewood communication products.

"There's been a lot of collaboration and working together to change people's behavior on the firewood issue," said NA Office of Communications Director Gina Childs. "We've had widespread agreement among foresters and conservation professionals that sharing the "Don't Move Firewood" message is critical to protecting the health of our nation's forests."

They are developing brochures, bookmarks and posters, writing news releases and fact sheets and conducting direct marketing ploys. They are organizing firewood forums and staffing trade show exhibits. If a certain communication tool might work, chances are they will try it. If a particular group might be receptive to their "Don't Move Firewood" message, they will likely send it.

Despite their lack of knowledge and experience in conducting public awareness initiatives, Donahue said a Maine State-sponsored survey showed they have made some progress of late.

"We worked with the state campgrounds last year to put in a notice saying 'Please don't move firewood'. Later, we did a survey of people to see if they were aware they should not do so. A majority of them said they had heard the message. Some of those people stopped moving firewood when they heard it. So there does seem to be some changing of people's behavior going on."

New Hampshire Forest Health Group Leader Kyle Lombard said he found similar results in his own state survey.

"We put "Don't Move Firewood" rack cards in everyone's state campground registration replies in early 2007. The rack card explained the firewood situation and asked people to leave it a home. We did surveys of just over 100 campers in both 2006 and 2007, before and after using the rack cards. In one year there was a decline from 42 to 32 percent of people moving firewood," he said.

Donahue added "The firewood issue takes up a lot of our time and money too. It takes up a lot of resources. But we feel this is an important way to protect (our) forests."

"On this issue, none of us have a lot of money, expertise or time. We've really been sharing what we have. This issue especially, with people coming from other places, if

we as natural resource professionals can work together with a consistent message it should have a greater impact," Donahue said.

Representatives from several state forestry agencies across New England and the NA worked side-by-side recently to spread the firewood message. They developed and staffed a "Don't Move Firewood" exhibit for the Northeast Campground Association Conference in Springfield, Mass., in April.

Their firewood message was enthusiastically received by the several hundred campground owners and association leaders in attendance. Many of them offered their support to help communicate the issue to their campers and others. One firewood exhibitor, Massachusetts Dept. of Conservation Forest Health Program Leader Charlie Burnham, said the conference proved beneficial for his forest health program. It helped him make direct contact with campground owners across the state.

Recently, several regional and national organizations expressed their own support for the cause. They included the Northeast Campground Association, the National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds, the American Camping Association, the Nature Conservancy, the Northeastern Area Association of State Foresters, and others. Even the racing industry is beginning to show signs of support for the initiative.

Purdue University Exotic Insects Educational Coordinator Jodie Ellis said that it's often difficult for agencies to come to this level of agreement on issues. "On this particular issue though, you see a lot of unity and solidarity for the cause. How often do you see that? It's very rare and very encouraging," she added.

Donahue said she hopes that by repeating the message, more and more people will begin to leave firewood at home. "If you're moving firewood, it's because you enjoy being outdoors. When you stop moving firewood, it helps protect the forest, something that you love," she said.