

Beetle-killed trees may affect drinking water

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SUMMIT COUNTY - If a picture says 1,000 words, then photographer Steve Tohari's pictures around Summit County would speak volumes.

"I've been a photographer for 40 years," said Tohari.

Taken just four years ago, the landscape in many of his pictures is green. Today, the same shots show a red sea of dead trees killed by bark beetle.

"All the green is gone. I could not take this picture again. All that's left is a devastated landscape of dead trees," said Tohari.

His landscape may be gone, but Tohari says he's more concerned with how the beetle kill will affect mountain water.

"What's going to happen to the snow without all the live trees?" said Tohari.

That was the topic during a meeting in Frisco with Denver Water and the Forest Health Task Force. Don Kennedy with Denver Water says a big concern is over the Dillon Reservoir.

"About 30 percent of our water yield comes from Summit County," said Kennedy.

The worry is that if the dead trees catch on fire, it could cause problems with the water shed. Sandy Briggs with the Forest Health Task Force says that would cause big problems for Denver residents.

"Certainly anyone who turns on a tap in Denver is going to have an interest in what happens up here in Summit County," said Briggs.

The problem is that after a fire, in many cases flash flood rain events send mud and other debris into the water, contaminating the source.

"We learned from the Buffalo Creek Fire that there could be a huge flooding event after such a fire," said Kennedy.

So federal, state, and local groups are trying to put a cost-sharing plan together to see where they should reduce fire danger and how much it will cost.

Still, Tohari says other forests need help too, so more should be done to raise money to fight the bark beetle epidemic.

"I wish Congress would realize the extent of this problem," said Tohari.

He says that's about the only way he can see anyone will be able to keep the water from disappearing just like the landscape he once recorded.

"So that we can save our watershed," said Tohari.

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