The southern pine beetle (SPB) has not plagued Texas’ pine forests in recent years as it did in the 1990s. But, the likelihood of another outbreak of this native pest continues to be of concern. With the help of an additional $500,000 for cost shares in FY 2009 provided by the US Forest Service (USFS) and administered by Texas Forest Service (TFS), Texas landowners can continue to work to protect their pine stands from the South’s most destructive forest pest. Since it began in 2003, the SPB Prevention Project has signed up over 1,000 landowners to thin 68,000 acres of beetle-prone pine stands in East Texas. More than 80% of these cases, involving 57,355 acres, have been completed and landowners paid a total of $3.1 million in cost shares as of July 1. To further boost the project in 2009 and promote timely thinning to reduce SPB hazard, cost share rates are being increased throughout East Texas. Furthermore, for the first time, a $2,000 incentive is being offered to loggers in 10 counties of southeast Texas to thin small (10-50 acre) tracts for SPB prevention.

The best long-term solution is to manage pine stands to maintain vigorous growth and reduce susceptibility to beetle attack. Periodic thinning is one of the most effective tools for avoiding losses to the southern pine beetle. TFS encourages landowners to thin their dense pine stands and take advantage of increased federal cost shares now available for this purpose.

According to John Nowak, SPB Prevention Program leader with the USFS in Asheville, NC, the Texas Forest Service has developed one of the most efficient and productive SPB prevention projects in the South. Applications for SPB cost shares in FY 2009 are now being accepted. Once an SPB application is approved, landowners are given 18 months to complete the thinning operation. Interested landowners should contact their consulting forester or nearest Texas Forest Service office to initiate the simple application procedure.

Pine stands in need of first thinning may qualify for cost shares if they are located in one of 25 beetle-prone counties in East Texas. Cost shares for the first thinning of pulpwood stands that rank as high hazard for SPB have been increased from $25 to $50/acre for high hazard stands in Anderson, Angelina, Cass, Cherokee, Gregg, Harrison, Houston, Marion, Nacogdoches, Panola, Rusk, Sabine, San Augustine, Shelby, and Trinity counties. Cost shares have been increased from $50 to $100 per acre for pine stands located within 5 miles of a National Forest - areas that are highly susceptible to SPB outbreaks.
Thinning of privately-owned pine stands in southeast Texas for purposes of SPB prevention has been hampered in recent years by mill quotas, below-average pulpwood prices, and the reluctance of loggers to thin small tracts due to increased setup costs. As a result, only 10% of all SPB cases to date have been implemented in counties of southeast Texas, historically the most SPB-prone area of the state.

To help offset these regional disadvantages, federal cost shares for SPB prevention have been increased from $40/acre to $80/acre for pine stands within 10 counties of southeast Texas (Hardin, Jasper, Liberty, Montgomery, Newton, Orange, Polk, San Jacinto, Tyler, and Walker counties), beginning on July 1, 2009. In addition, a $2,000 incentive is being offered to loggers to thin tracts of 10-50 acres in size that involve an approved SPB prevention case within this 10-county area. This new incentive, only available in southeast Texas, will be in addition to the cost shares paid directly to the land owner. Maximum cost share limits per federal fiscal year will remain at $5,000 per individual landowners and $10,000 for partnerships and trusts with two or more partners. Cost shares for pre-commercial thinning also are available. A TFS District Forester or your consulting forester can help you hazard rate your stand and apply for SPB cost shares.

The southern pine beetle devastated large areas of East Texas’ pine forests in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, but has occurred at very low levels in East Texas since 1997. But, outbreaks tend to be cyclic, with peaks every 6 – 10 years in any given area. Thus, experts believe it is just a matter of time before beetle populations return to high levels. For further information about the southern pine beetle or cost shares for prevention, visit the Texas Forest Service web page at http://texasforestservice.tamu.edu, or contact Dr. Ronald Billings at (979) 458-6650 or e-mail, rbillings@tfs.tamu.edu.