



# SOUTHERN PINE BEETLE: FALL BRINGS A FEW SURPRISES

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As 2010 draws to a close, it seemed that a positive outlook would continue for southern pine beetles (*Dendroctonus frontalis*) in Alabama – the low insect population contributed to low infestations. There were very few documented spots at the end of the summer, with the state only receiving reports of isolated cases of infestations. From both aerial detection and ground monitoring, southern pine beetles (SPB) did not appear in pine stands.

In the past, a normal occurrence would have them attacking and killing over 60,000 trees in a given year. In 2004 and 2005, the number of detected SPB spots was extremely high. Some counties reported more than 300 spots during a given aerial detection flight. Despite the drought of 2006 and 2007, the number of beetle spots began to decline. Even in 2008, the SPB population continued to decrease at a steady pace. For both 2009 and 2010, population predictions were low and stable.

This past spring, the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) conducted a pheromone survey to predict the population of this native bark beetle. The data analysis from this survey indicated that the SPB population would remain steadily low.

The good news, however, did not last. As the fall season proceeded, heightened activity from bark beetles was reported. With most of the identified infestations concentrated in the southwest part of the state, detection flights were conducted to record the actual status of this situation. Based on these flights and ground monitoring activities, hundreds of beetle infestations now exist in the state. Some counties are reporting as many as 100 or more beetle spots. Wilcox County, for instance, is reporting over 400 spots detected so far this season. These high numbers will classify many of the monitored counties as epidemic.

Some of these documented infestations are caused by the SPB, while others are caused by another bark beetle of the south, the Ips engraver beetle. Both are native and can cause serious damage and outright mortality to pines. Ground surveying of identified spots will assist in distinguishing whether the type of beetle attack is SPB or Ips.

The increase in beetle attacks is most likely due to environmental factors and insect population cycles, both having a significant influence on bark beetle levels. The cool, wet climate of spring transcended into a hot, dry summer, resulting in an unpredictable number of infestations this fall.

If pine timber growers and forest landowners believe that declining pines are due to a bark beetle attack, they should contact their local AFC office. A confirmation on the beetle will be given, management recommendations written, and control options offered. For further information about the Alabama Forestry Commission's southern pine beetle program, visit the AFC website at: [www.forestry.alabama.gov/SPBBiology.aspx?bv=3&s=1](http://www.forestry.alabama.gov/SPBBiology.aspx?bv=3&s=1).<sup>†</sup>