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# Insect Problems Encountered by the Firewood Gatherer

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## **Insect Problems Encountered by the Firewood Gatherer**

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### **Introduction**

Firewood is an attractive source of energy, and it is also attractive to insects as food material and shelter. For the most part, insect questions arise from firewood users when they hear noise coming from their woodpiles, see boring dust pushed out of holes in the wood, or find insects crawling and flying from the woodpile. It is even a greater concern when the same insects are found crawling inside the home.

With few exceptions, the insects found emerging from firewood in Utah will not survive indoors and are only capable of infesting well-dried logs which have bark intact. Some bark beetles can develop in firewood and later infest healthy trees. These species include the mountain pine beetle, elm bark beetle, and some species of *Ips* beetles. A few simple precautions can prevent damage by these firewood insects.

Hundreds of insect species can inhabit the wood of native and ornamental trees and shrubs in Utah. The firewood gatherer need only be familiar with five groups of wood-infesting insects: carpenter ants, termites, powderpost and anobiid beetles, wood borers, and bark beetles. The first three groups are mainly found in older, dead material, whereas the bark beetles are found in fresh slash and recently cut wood.

### **Carpenter Ants**

Carpenter ants are large, black ants, 3/8-1/2 inch in length. Generally, they are found in old, rotting stumps. Removal of unsplit lower-bole sections does provide an opportunity for transporting the colony to the homesite, with some risk of infestation if placed near other old, rotting wood, including rotted house timber. If carpenter ants are found in firewood material, leave those sections in the woods or split the sections and knock out the ants while in the woods. Other techniques would be to split and expose infested pieces to the sun for drying. Burn any pieces suspected of any carpenter ants before using uninfested pieces.

### **Termites**

Termites are generally not a problem in the dry and cold climate typical of states in the Intermountain Region. Termites are small, white insects, approximately 1/4 inch in length, that live in enclosed sites and nest underground. They shun light but otherwise live in locations similar to carpenter ants. Termites that are occasionally found in firewood

normally do not contain reproductive stages of the termite. Furthermore, the low humidity in houses would cause the few termites in firewood to quickly dry out and die. Options available to the woodcutter are the same as those discussed for carpenter ant infestations.

### **Powderpost and Anobiid Beetles**

Occasionally powderpost (Lyctidae) and anobiid (Anobiidae) beetles are found infesting structural wood and furniture in Utah. These infestations can be serious and difficult to control. Native species of these insects occur naturally in dead tree limbs and dry, seasoned wood. However, the problems that we have encountered with these pests have been from infested wood products introduced from eastern and southern states. Fresh piles of very fine sawdust and small round holes are signs of an infestation. Control may be obtained by heat treatment of the wood, injection of pesticides into the boring holes, or fumigation. Contact your county agent for further information.

### **Wood Borers**

Wood borers are the most frequently observed insects infesting firewood and cause homeowners anxious moments when their feeding noise is detected and/or boring dust begins to pile up around infested firewood. Also, they cause concern when rather large and ominous looking adults emerge from the wood, fly toward a light source, and collect near windows. These insects are beetles, moths, or non-stinging wasps and vary from 1/2-3 inches in length. Wood borers are primarily a nuisance and they present little or no risk to the homeowner, as they prefer dead trees of the same species from which they emerged. The chance of borers once removed from the woods finding suitable material to infest is remote. Furniture, wall framing, or other seasoned woods are not suitable for wood borer attack. Occasionally infested structural wood may contain active borers but rarely do they tunnel extensively enough to cause structural failure. Generally, these insects have life cycles of one or more years, so burning firewood the winter after it is gathered would prevent emergence. Further information on this group of insects can be obtained from the Extension Entomology, Fact Sheet No. 18.

### **Bark Beetles**

Bark beetles in firewood present a hazard to trees adjacent to the woodpile but cannot affect the home. Bark beetles live between the bark and the wood or in the bark itself. They create distinct patterns on the inside of the bark which can be used for identification. The young are white C-shaped grubs up to 1/4 inch in length. Adults are black to reddish brown, cylindrical and also up to 1/4 inch in length.

If the tree is infested, bark beetles will usually be quite numerous. Problems arise when homeowners stack infested firewood next to living trees of the same species. For instance, lodgepole pine, infested by the mountain pine beetle, stacked against another living pine could lead to infestation of the pine plus any adjacent pine. When bark beetles successfully attack a tree, an odor is released to which other bark beetles respond. Therefore, a greater hazard may develop if similar bark beetles are in the area.

If bark beetles concern you, choose trees for firewood that have lost most of their needles or bark. This normally takes 2-3 years, by which time the bark beetles will have abandoned the tree.

If the tree is infested, you can peel off the bark and leave the beetles and the bark in the woods. Infested firewood (bark attached) can be laid in an open area exposed to the summer sun for 2-3 days and then rolled to expose the underside. The high temperatures kill insects in or under the bark. Another technique is to cover infested wood completely with clear plastic during summer to obtain high temperatures lethal to the insect under the plastic. Chemical insecticides are also available for bark beetle control. However, to limit risk of exposure to toxic fumes when burning firewood, non-chemical options listed above should be considered.

### **Sources of Assistance**

State Extension Entomologists  
Department of Biology  
Utah State University  
Logan, UT 84322-5305  
Telephone (435)797-2515

State Extension Foresters  
Forest Resource Department  
Utah State University  
Logan, UT 84322-5215  
Telephone (435) 797-2550

Forest Pest Management Specialists  
USDA Forest Service  
324 25th Street  
Ogden, UT 84401  
Telephone (801)625-5459

Division of State Lands & Forestry  
355 W. North Temple  
3 Triad Center, Suite 400  
Salt Lake City, UT 84180-1203  
Telephone (801) 538-5508

### **Precautionary Statement**

All pesticides have both benefits and risks. Benefits can be maximized and risks minimized by reading and following the label. Pay close attention to the directions for use and the precautionary statements. The information on pesticide labels contains both instructions and limitations. Pesticide labels are legal documents, and it is a violation of federal and state laws to use a pesticide inconsistent with its labeling. The pesticide applicator is legally responsible for its proper use. Always read and follow the label.

***Dr. Jay B Karren***  
***Extension Entomologist***

### **Source of Information**

This article was prepared with the assistance of the Forest Service, United States

Department of Agriculture, 324 25th Street Ogden, UT 84401, David G. Holland, Group Leader, Forest Pest Management.