

# How healthy are Carbon County's aspen groves?

BY DAVID LOUIS

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RAWLINS — The quaking aspen is known throughout the west as the icon of mountain scenery. Their dazzling white bark and yellow leaves in the fall bring the forests into Technicolor brilliance, but the majestic groves are currently under siege in many states.

As part of its outreach efforts to spread knowledge of the plight facing aspen stands, the Western Aspen Alliance (WAA) will present an ecological discussion of the issues to forest management officials and the public at 7 p.m., Thursday at the Platte Valley Community Center in Saratoga.

WAA is a non-profit organization based at Utah State University. Its mission is to improve the management of aspen by linking ecological, social, and economic sciences through collaboration and information sharing with forest and land management agencies.

"We are non-partisan and basically trying to get the information out to people who work on the ground, and are driven by a lot of issues involving aspen forests throughout the west," said WAA Director Paul Rogers.

"Probably the number one issue comes from both wild and domestic hooved animals and their impacts, and they can have big impacts on aspen forests. In certain places they are actually threatening those forests."

Pando (Latin for, "I spread") — a grove of aspen trees near Fish Lake, Utah believed to be 80,000 years old — could be dying. The grove was identified years ago as the world's largest living organism. Scientists believe the nearly 50,000 trees are genetically identical because they grow from spreading their roots instead of seed. Most of the trees are believed to be connected at the roots underground and form one plant covering more than 100 acres.

"If any stage of the growth is interrupted then you are threatening the long-term survival. If grazing animals are eating the young sprouts, over time you end up with a population of one generation. In some of the areas of the west we only have senior citizens of the aspen populations," Rogers said

It is the lack of young sprouts surrounding Pando that may be causing its death.

In general, one of the primary culprits are elk.



Rawlins Daily Times, Gavin Elliott

Aspen trees will be the topic of discussion 7 p.m. on Thursday at the Platte Valley Community Center when Western Aspen Alliance makes a presentation and holds a discussion on the challenges Aspen stands face.

"Elk play a big role in some areas of the west, and some people feel their populations are going and becoming supportable," Rogers said. "There is a high amount of nutrition in the tiny aspens coming up from the ground. If the elk are allowed to eat the (sprouts) for years or decades then you can see where this is headed. Sometimes, it is so bad you will have a whole forest that will collapse."

Along with the presentation, Rogers and others will conduct a field tour of stands in the upper North Platte Valley. Anyone interested should meet at 9 a.m., Friday at the Platte Valley Community Center parking lot.

Both the presentation and field tour are open to the public. Participants attending the field tour are asked to bring their own lunch if they did not RSVP in advance.