

**Louisiana Emergency Beetle Subcommittee of the
House Committee on Agriculture, Forestry, Aquaculture, and Rural Development**

Minutes of Meeting
2024-2025 Interim
August 14, 2024

I. CALL TO ORDER

Representative Mike Johnson, chair of the Louisiana Emergency Beetle Subcommittee of the House Committee on Agriculture, Forestry, Aquaculture, and Rural Development, called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. in Room 3, in the state capitol in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

II. ROLL CALL

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Representative Michael T. Johnson, chair
Representative Rhonda Gaye Butler
Representative Troy D. Romero
Representative Rodney Wayne Schamerhorn

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Representative John E. Wyble

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:

Lashay Masami, attorney
Ashley Davillier, committee administrative assistant

ADDITIONAL ATTENDEES PRESENT:

Rebecca Marshall, sergeant at arms

III. DISCUSSION

To study and address the devastation of the forest industry due to the infestation of beetles

David A. Peterson, LA Atty General / LA Department of Justice, 1885 North Third Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, spoke for information only and provided a handout, Exhibit A, which is included in the committee records. He suggested experts with knowledge on the beetle infestation should assess the damage done by the beetles prior to cutting down the stressed trees on private properties.

Jacques Thibodeaux, GOHSEP, 7667 Independence Boulevard, no city, state or zip code provided, spoke for information only and provided a handout, Exhibit B, which is included in the committee records. He addressed the summary of statistics that was included in the handout.

Barney Arceneaux, Executive Director, Louisiana Municipal Association, 6767 Perkins Road, Baton Rouge, LA 70808, spoke for information only. He reported that his office had not received any concerns regarding the beetle infestation. Representative Mike Johnson asked if there was a hazard on private property that would affect public safety, how would it be handled. Mr. Arceneaux explained that in his experience, property owners have always allowed the city to remove hazards from their property without any issues.

Representative Butler stated that rural areas do not have funding or programs for tree maintenance, and she wants to make the municipalities aware of the issue. Mr. Arceneaux stated that his office is working on new educational programs for small towns, and he plans to include the tree maintenance funding issues in the programs.

Guy Cormier, Police Jury Association of LA, 707 North Seventh, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, spoke for information only. He explained if an emergency declaration was established, his office would open up sites to contain the debris from roadsides. He stated they can only remove debris from the right of ways and not from private properties.

Chad Robique, DOTD, no address provided, spoke for information only. He stated the parish maintenance superintendents drive around on all roads on a biweekly basis as part of a comprehensive evaluation of dead trees along state roads, and they remove hazardous trees from right of ways as needed. He added that if they received more funding, they would hire contractors to remove stressed trees during an emergency declaration.

Seth Matherne, LA DOTD, 11036 Jefferson Lane, Clinton, LA 70722, spoke for information only. He stated that federal funding for tree removal can only be utilized during an emergency declaration.

Jacques Berry, no other information provided, spoke for information only. He stated the funding amount that each district received for tree removal was \$4.2 million.

Buck Vandersteen, Louisiana Forestry Association, no address provided, spoke for information only. He requested homeowner insurance companies add dead tree removal as an option on premiums at an additional cost.

Charles Hansberry, LA Department of Insurance, 1702 North Third Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, spoke for information only. He gave details on homeowner's insurance policy coverage, stating that tree damage caused by insects is typically excluded from policies but damage caused by a weather related peril is covered.

Wade Dubea, LDAF, 5825 Florida Boulevard, Baton Rouge, LA, no zip code provided, spoke for information only. He explained that stressed tree removal in urban areas are their main focus currently and he is hopeful in finding a funding source to tackle all areas statewide that have been affected by the drought and beetle infestation.

Joe Mapes, Farm Bureau, 731 Lakeland Drive, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, spoke for information only. He suggested trying to obtain federal funding through the Stafford Act to help with removing dead trees and trees that are on the verge of falling.

Yolunda Righteous, LDEQ, 602 North Fifth Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, spoke for information only. She explained the process of what happens to the damaged trees once they have been removed. Representative Butler asked if her office requires paperwork on where wood waste is transported from. Ms. Righteous answered that the landfills require the entities transporting wood waste to be registered and their identification numbers are tracked for that purpose.

Kyle Prestenbach, LDEQ, 602 North Fifth Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, spoke for information only. He gave an overview of the open burning regulations and their limitations.

Karla Vidrine, LDEQ, 602 North Fifth Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, spoke for information only. She explained that as the environmental scientist with LDEQ, she works closely with other governmental agencies when natural disasters occur. She stated that her department has a comprehensive plan to clean up debris using pre-approved sites when an emergency declaration is in place.

Marc Mercer, Town of Ball, 153 Williford Road, Ball, LA, no zip code provided, spoke for information only. Representative Mike Johnson asked if trees are dying at a rapid rate in his area. Mr. Mercer explained he has owned his own tree company for several years, and he has never experienced trees dying as fast as they have been recently. He stated it would be helpful for the committee to be able to speed up the process of removing dead trees from highways, given someone has already lost their life due to this issue. He suggested that some of the strict regulations that fall under LDEQ's authority be moved to the Louisiana Department of Agriculture to help speed up the hazardous tree removal process.

Daryn Bovard, LA Arborist Association, 742 Fifth Street, Baton Rouge, LA, no zip code provided, spoke for information only. He stated he is looking for stakeholders to help fund a newly established nonprofit organization called Community Tree that would help low income homeowners remove dead trees from their property.

Cheston Hill, office of Commissioner of Administration Taylor Barras, 1201 North Third Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, spoke as the designee of an elected official. Representative Mike Johnson explained that he received a letter from an elderly constituent's daughter regarding a hazardous dead tree on her mother's property that she needs removed. He asked Mr. Hill to speak with his colleagues

and discuss what can be done for situations similar to this one, and to attend the next committee meeting with some possible solutions.

Austin Lewis, governor's office, no address provided, spoke for information only. He stated his office is currently looking into possible solutions to the beetle infestation issue.

Witness cards submitted by individuals who did not speak are as follows: 1 for information only. Witness cards are included in the committee records.

Prepared statements were received via email.

IV. OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

V. ANNOUNCEMENTS

There were no announcements.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

Representative Mike Johnson offered a motion to adjourn. Without objection, the motion passed by a vote of 4 yeas and 0 nays. Representatives Mike Johnson, Butler, Romero, and Schamerhorn voted yea.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:33 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Chair Michael T. Johnson

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Date approved: