

Thousands of Sierra trees getting cut to prepare for summer

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Once bathed in deep green, the forests in the foothills and Sierra east of the San Joaquin Valley are increasingly turning reddish-brown as drought- and beetle-weary trees die by the month.

It is a somber warning of a potentially dangerous summer.

That ominous unnatural color reveals the homes of Western bark beetles, who bore into ponderosa pines, their tree of choice, and carve tiny pathways into drought-stricken trees that possess too little sap to eject the insects, as they had before the drought.

The tiny beetle, about the size of a flea, has mobilized fire crews, utilities, county officials, the California Department of Transportation, the U.S. Forest Service, local volunteer agencies and residents to reduce the threat of potentially devastating fires.

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A study next month examining trees from the air is expected to report a near doubling of the 29 million trees already reportedly dead or dying. In 2014, it was already a crisis when 3.3 million trees had fallen prey to the infestation, said Daniel Berlant, communications director for Cal Fire.

“From the top of Kern (County) to Tuolumne County is the hardest hit,” Berlant said. “But we are seeing tree mortality moving farther north into the Placer County area at the top of Lake Tahoe.”

Local and state officials want the ponderosa pine’s territory, generally above 3,000 feet in elevation, declared a federal disaster area. But so far, the pitch has fallen on deaf ears.

“I don’t know why you have to wait for a disaster, for someone to get killed or maimed,” Madera County Supervisor Tom Wheeler said. “I don’t know how they can say we don’t have a disaster.”

Wheeler said concerned constituents are calling. They want help.

“I can’t go anywhere that people don’t say they lost another tree, five more, 10 more,” he said. “I get emails or texts every day.”

We may be looking at the mother of all fires this summer.

Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove

Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove, whose district covers mountain areas in Madera and Fresno counties, said a Federal Emergency Management Agency declaration can only be issued for disaster responses, not preventing them.

In the meantime, McClintock is trying to move \$200 million in the federal budget from U.S. Department of the Interior land acquisition programs into “hazardous fuels reduction.”

But \$200 million is a small amount for what is needed. In Fresno County alone, officials say the cost to cut necessary

firefighting fuel breaks along roads will reach \$98 million.

Chipping in

Despite drought-relieving rains and snow this winter in the Sierra, for many trees it's too late, and tree deaths will continue for three to five more years, officials say.

The state's Tree Mortality Task Force recently added new members: Calaveras, Amador and El Dorado counties.

Meanwhile, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Caltrans, Fresno County, local fire-safe councils and California's two largest electric utilities are funneling millions of dollars to cut down dead and dying trees.

Caltrans officials estimate they will remove upwards of 40,000 trees statewide along highways this year.

"Since trees continue to be affected by drought and beetle infestation, the number of trees that need to be removed will continue to grow," said Cory Burkarth, a public information officer for Caltrans in Fresno.

The Sierra National Forest is shifting money slated for fighting fires to tree removal and reinforcing fuel breaks, said Iveth Hernandez, public affairs assistant for the forest.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. has 54,000 miles of power lines in fire-prone areas. It will remove 124,000 diseased, dead or dying trees this year, three times more than average before the drought, said spokeswoman Katie Allen. She said the utility has 80 to 100 crews contracted in local counties.

PG&E also is distributing \$2 million to fire-safe councils for tree removal and fire-break efforts. Cal Fire also is distributing funds from State Responsibility Area fees paid by residents living in Cal Fire protection areas.

In February, Cal Fire issued \$1.75 million in grants for fire-safe councils between Kern and Tuolumne counties. Nearly all the grants focused on tree removal.

Biomass plant idea

For now, dead and dying trees are cut down and left on private property. The trees have little value, but one idea is to use them for biomass to generate electricity.

North Fork is reviving its old mill site as a biomass plant to use wood chips and wood debris to produce one to two megawatts of electricity, which would provide power to between 1,000 and 2,000 homes. The project was granted \$4.9 million by the California Energy Commission last year and could open in early 2017, creating jobs and a way to use the massive amounts of dead-tree waste.

But even though it can use waste wood, the plant will not come close to meeting the need to get rid of the trees.

"Our capacity will be more than exceeded by just the logs in Madera County," said Justine Reynolds, project manager for the Yosemite/Sequoia Resource Conservation and Development Council, the nonprofit shepherding the project.

A 25-megawatt Fresno biomass plant that produces electricity from agricultural waste also could be a destination for wood chips made from dead and dying trees.

Rick Spurlock, plant manager for Rio Bravo Fresno, said the facility could take wood waste from Fresno, Tulare and Madera counties. Making it cost effective is an issue because of transportation costs to move the waste from the mountains, he said.

Company officials are working to establish agreements to get material from high-hazard zones. If the wood catches fire in the forest, it pollutes. Rio Bravo's pollution technology can remove up to 99 percent of pollutants from reaching the air compared with open burning.

"In my opinion, there is no other alternative for this material," he said.

Making the cuts

Priority for tree cutting is given to areas where fire history and the number of dead trees could cause the perfect firestorm.

In eastern Fresno County, dead trees are coming down, but probably not fast enough, officials say.

"These trees have been through this before, but we've never had this much of an infestation of bark beetles," said Jim McDougald, a division chief for Cal Fire in the Fresno-Kings Unit.

For now, the focus is cutting dead trees within 200 feet of either side of a roadway. Those trees, marked for death by blue dots of paint, are then ground into wood chips and spread on the forest floor.

Clearing both sides of the road will keep fire from climbing into dead trees and spreading embers toward nearby homes.

Cressman Road, located off Highway 168 near Shaver Lake, has both fire history and widespread dead trees. Like many of the other priority sites, Cressman has only one way in and one way out, and requires a fuel break to allow for easier evacuation, McDougald said.

"Work we're doing in here will reduce the risk of a fire that can cost millions of dollars and save the community," he said.

But more work, he admits, needs to be done.

In Madera and Mariposa counties the mortality rate is 80 percent to 90 percent. The hardest hit populated locations are Cascadel Woods, near North Fork, and Bass Lake.

Ponderosa pines normally die from bark beetles, but the numbers usually are quite small.

"The normal kill rate is 1 to 2 percent," said Len Nielson, a forester and division chief for Cal Fire in the Madera-Mariposa-Merced Unit.

But the beetle population has exploded during the drought. As beetle numbers grew, the number of dead and dying trees has grown along with it.

"In Cascadel, it's 90 percent," Nielson said. "You can't find a live ponderosa pine. If they're not dead, they're already infested."

Summertime blues

Norval Lee watches anxiously as a dead ponderosa pine outside his Cascadel Woods home is attacked limb-by-limb by a chainsaw-wielding worker in a cherry picker.

He tried to save the tree with plant food and extra water, but to no avail.

Now, he is most worried about keeping big trees, which puts the "Woods" part of the name in his rural, mountain Madera County hamlet at 4,200 feet in elevation.

"It's near power lines," he said. "I don't want any pine trees in my yard at all ... I'm hoping to get that tree down so it doesn't fall and hit my house."

The work at Lee's house was part of a PG&E program to clear trees from power lines.

In the Cressman Road area residents are encouraged seeing McDougald and fire crews clearing dead trees.

Abb Adkisson, a retiree from Los Angeles who has lived on Cressman full time for 21 years, says the fire crews are doing "a fantastic job" cutting down trees and inspecting properties.

"What we're most worried about is the unknown and the fire season coming up," said Adkisson, who also serves as a firefighter for the Pine Ridge Volunteer Fire Department.

Mainly we live up here because of the trees and the forest. The seriousness of fires makes it so that these trees have to come down.

Abb Adkisson, Cressman Road resident in eastern Fresno County

But seeing the trees fall brings a sense of sadness, too.

"Mainly we live up here because of the trees and the forest," he said. "The seriousness of fires makes it so that these trees have to come down."

Pat Ubbink, who also retired from Los Angeles and has lived on Cressman for 25 years, recently paid to have 80 pines removed. It gave her some peace of mind but "it cost quite a bit."

"If a fire comes through here, I think we'll do pretty good now that our trees are all cut down," she said.

But despite the cost, she feels fortunate because she was able to pay for it. Tree fallers have long waiting lists.

"If everybody could afford to do something it would be much better, but I know they can't," she said.

Oakhurst tree faller Richard Brechbuehl, who has been in the business for 40 years, said there is a lot of potential work, but that estimates and costs are often a bitter pill for customers.

"People are in shock," said Brechbuehl, who owns Tree Works. "They can't afford to get it done or they're hoping the government or PG&E will do it."

Speaking from a home near Echo Valley, where he had just removed 60 trees, he said, the bill was \$24,000 for the homeowner.

That's enough for residents, who have been turning against forest management policies.

"The average person at the grocery store gets it now and they're mad," he said. "But it's too late because no one anticipated this kind of disaster."

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