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New Mexico tree deaths double in 2024

Insects and warm conditions driving forest damage statewide

SANTA FE – Tree deaths in New Mexico's forests more than doubled from 2023, according to the new Forest Health Conditions Report released by the Energy Minerals and Natural Resources Forestry Division.

Key findings from the report show:

- 70,000 acres of dead conifer trees – up from the 33,000 acres in 2023.
- 406,000 acres damaged by insects, disease and harsh conditions — an increase of 42,000 acres or 12% since 2023.
- 39% rise in trees losing needles, leaves and turning brown or red statewide.

"The uptick in these numbers is surprising, compared with the previous year," said **Victor Lucero,** Forest Health Program Coordinator with New Mexico Forestry Division. "But it's less surprising when you factor in the warmer conditions this state saw and continues to see. Additionally, burn scar areas from previous wildfires proved to be significant crucibles for insect activity and tree mortality."

The report, created in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, is based on aerial surveys to map insect and disease activity across 14 million acres of state, private, Tribal, and federal forests and woodlands.

"You can think of our survey as measuring three different types of bad outcomes for trees," **Lucero** said. "*Damage* really means any damage to the tree caused by insects – insects who thrive in dry, warm conditions, because the trees are weakened and less able to defend themselves. *Defoliation* is a sign that trees have been invaded but haven't died off yet. While *mortality* means the tree is left standing dead after prolonged insect attack."

Native insects proved to be the primary cause of tree damage. These include the caterpillars of the Douglas-fir tussock moth, which defoliated 18,000 acres within mixed conifer forests, a significant increase from 2023. Piñon needle scale, a tiny sap-sucking insect, defoliated 16,000

acres. Other culprits include bark beetles, Piñon ips, Western Spruce budworm, and Ponderosa needleminer.

Aerial view of bark beetle-killed ponderosa pine on a portion of the Hermit's Peak Calf Canyon fire burn scar. Photo by Crystal Tischler, USFS

Drought, which remains persistent in New Mexico, decreased slightly last year. Forest and woodland acres impacted by drought and heat decreased by 65% statewide. However, the state's mean temperature rose to 56.3 degrees, making 2024 the second warmest year on record.

The public can access the full report and additional information on the Forestry Division's Forest Health webpage, including the Data Dashboard with five years of tracking data. For specific information about bark beetles, visit this resource page

Landowners are encouraged to contact their local Forestry Division District office to develop management plans that can lessen or prevent serious impacts from drought stress, insects and disease, while also curbing the potential for catastrophic wildfire.

Link to this press release available here.

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