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Tree deaths tripled across New Mexico in 2025 amid drought, heat

Annual survey of 14 million acres shows beetle kill up 211 percent

SANTA FE – Tree deaths tripled in New Mexico during the second warmest year on record, according to a new report that shows a mixed portrait of resilience and vulnerability across New Mexico's forested landscapes.

Each year, the New Mexico Forestry Division and U.S. Forest Service conduct aerial surveys to map insect and disease activity across 14 million acres of state, private, Tribal, and federal forests and woodlands. The subsequent report captures a comprehensive analysis of forest health across New Mexico.

"It's important to contextualize that this report is a snapshot of New Mexico's forests at a specific time," said **State Forester Laura McCarthy.** "However, this snapshot is a good predictor of what to expect for the next few years if such meager precipitation and warm winter temperatures persist."

Key findings from the report show that during 2025:

- Beetle-killed conifer forest increased 211%, mostly on national forest lands;
- Defoliation (distinct from mortality) decreased 51%;
- Total acreage with damage decreased 6%;
- Forests impacted by drought and heat increased 66%.

While pest populations boom and bust in cycles, New Mexico's forests are persistently stressed by prolonged drought, rising temperatures and resource competition due to too many trees on the landscape.

"Bark beetles are a natural check on forest density, but warm winter temperatures are extending their activity, and overly dense, drought-stressed forests are a buffet for these insects," said **Victor Lucero**, forest health program manager. "Ultimately, beetle-killed trees will be replaced by younger trees that better resist pests, and canopy openings will foster a richer understory. But understandably, the visual impact on the ground can be shocking."

Even within large areas of mortality, pockets of surviving trees persist and will help new generations resprout, as is seen today in the footprint of an early 2000s mortality events that killed 80% of piñon pines in some areas.

Mortality events can temporarily heighten wildfire risk, but once dead needles fall off, that risk lowers considerably. Keeping some dead trees in place helps stabilize soil and cycle nutrients. Whether or not a mortality event has occurred, landowners should always thin overly dense stands.

“Our forests have exceeded the land’s carrying capacity,” Lucero said. “No matter what, disturbance events will try to rebalance our ecosystems, whether it’s through human intervention, like proactive thinning, or biological events such as pest outbreaks or wildfire. We can manage disturbances to prevent catastrophic events like these in the future.”

Earlier this year, the state and universities accelerated New Mexico’s ability to restore damaged forests by breaking ground on the New Mexico Reforestation Center, which will ramp up production of climate-adapted seedlings to proactively respond to a changing landscape.

View the report and the forest health dashboard for the complete survey.

Bark beetle information and management strategies are available on our forest health page. For land management assistance, contact your local district office.

This press release is available online here.

Aerial view of the extent of beetle kill, as seen in red, in untreated piñon-juniper woodland (above) versus a landscape that has been thinned (below). Photos by Victor Lucero.

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