

ABC KGO-TV Channel 7

San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose

Dead, Dry Trees Major Fire Threat

July 20, 2004 - When fires rage in southern California, it's not just wind or dry conditions fueling them. The region is awash in dead trees, weakened by drought and killed by beetles. And northern California has the same threat. Infested trees are dying by the thousands. An Assignment 7, we explain why a dead, dry tree is the most dangerous kind.

This pine might have lived 200 years more and grown twice as big, but tiny beetles are killing it.

Dr. Reese Halter, forest biologist: "They bore and they nosh their way right through."

Dr. Halter: "There are billions of three kinds of beetles rocking and rolling like we've never seen in modern times."

Stressed from drought, trees under attack don't have enough sap to resist.

Dr. Halter: "Once they're inside, go through the bark, that's it, the fight for the tree is over."

So the dead ones topple, adding to the dry brush, or stand like torches, ready to carry flames to the tree-tops.

Dr. Halter: "Once that happens the crown fire will spread to all the trees around it."

That's what happened last year in southern California -- fires that hurled flames ahead of fire lines and were almost impossible to fight.

Dr. Halter: "It's like 80,000 homes are right there."

The south state has more people, but northern California has more pine forest, and almost all of it -- from the Sierra to Shasta -- is being chewed on by beetles.

Dr. Halter: "All of the west is in a serious situation."

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As bad as pine beetles are, they're not the Bay Area's only problem. A dozen counties are also fighting sudden oak death, a fungal disease that kills not only oaks, but other native trees too. More dead trees, more fuels for the fires.

Carol Selig, Mill Valley homeowner: "It really was only in the last two weeks. It just looked dead."

These Mill Valley homeowners were startled to find an oak in their yard turned brown almost overnight.

Rand Selig, Mill Valley homeowner: "Oh it's going to come down very quickly, yeah they're gonna have to."

It's now a fire hazard in a neighborhood where dense wooded canyons are already high risk.

Kent Julin, Marin County forester "Sudden oak death has changed the forest. It's much more prone to burning now."

Discolored leaves can be the first sign of sickness. On other oaks, a seeping wound shows up on the trunk.

Julin: "The tree recognizes that it's been attacked."

Either way, again beetles spot the weakened tree and start boring in, devouring from the inside.

Julin: "This 80-year-old tree probably has until the end of the summer."

Julin: "I know it's a matter of time that a fire's going to burn through these woods, no doubt about it, so clear around your home, pay up your insurance."

Ironically, fire could be the cure to wipe-out the beetles, cleanse and regenerate the forest. But suppressed for so long, it's risky to set loose.

Dr. Halter: "I don't see a problem with using inmates to help us, right now."

One idea? Putting state prison crews, who already work during fires, out in forests now, clearing dead trees.

Dr. Halter: "So why not become more proactive, at least around the homeowners, some of the homeowners homes, try to get in front of this as best we can."

Experts warn we can't afford to ignore the subtle signs of our stressed forest, a brown tree in a sea of green and tiny holes that spell big problems.

More Information

- <http://www.globalforest.org/>