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Fire threat grows in California forest as trees continue to die

By Tim Molloy
 THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAKE ARROWHEAD, Calif. — Five suspected arson fires this week rekindled fears among residents and forest officials already working feverishly to avoid a repeat of last fall's deadly wildfires near this mountain resort.

They have good reason to worry: The risk is even greater this year.

Bark beetles preying on drought-weakened pine trees have devastated hundreds of thousands of trees in the sprawling San Bernardino National Forest, killing nearly half the trees in some areas.

Huge sections of the forest are ripe for another catastrophic blaze. "If these drought conditions keep up, the entire forest is at risk of dying off, and of course this is a huge risk for fires," said Jack Blackwell, forester of the Forest Service's Pacific Southwestern region.

Only a fraction of the dead trees burned last fall when two huge fires blackened more than 160,000 acres, destroyed about 1,100 homes and killed six people.

Even more trees have died in the past six months. The Forest Service and others are furiously cutting firebreaks and removing as many dead trees as possible before fire danger peaks in September.

Much of the wood is worthless because of the beetle infestation, and timber companies run up heavy expenses shipping it to the nearest mill more than 200 miles away.

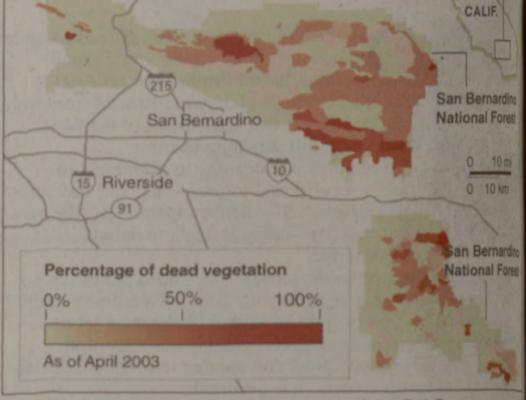
The Forest Service is also dousing insecticide on healthy trees in camping areas and conducting prescribed burns like one that went out of control at Big Bear Lake last month and turned into a 350-acre forest fire. The miscue outraged already nervous residents.

Forest dwellers were also unnerved Monday when the suspected arson fires started west of Lake Arrowhead. The blazes were quickly contained, and no arrests have been made.

The forest grew thick over the last century as residents favored the privacy and beauty of being surrounded by firs, cedars and pines. But drought in recent years weakened the trees, and warmer temperatures allowed bark beetles to repro-

More dead wood increases fire risk

Forest officials are working to avoid a repeat of Southern California rampant wildfires last fall. The risk is even greater now that bark beetles have devastated hundreds of thousands of trees in the sprawling San Bernardino National Forest, killing nearly half the trees in some areas.



duce in greater numbers. The new federal Healthy Forest Restoration Act allows more timber and brush to be cleared with less environmental scrutiny.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service is distributing \$150 million to tribes, local governments and others for tree removal and other fire prevention efforts in Southern California. The Forest Service is providing another \$50 million.

In addition, the Forest Service has been given \$40 million on top of its normal budget for fire prevention in Southern California.

Forest officials said the funding is a good start but not enough to remove all the dead trees in the San Bernardino forest. Nervous homeowners, too, are rushing to join the effort.

Idyllwild resident Betty Miller and her neighbors have removed numerous trees in the past few months. But she has had to wait for a contractor to cut back an oak overhanging their home.

"He's so busy, we're on a waiting list," she said. "It's totally unbelievable the amount of trees they're cutting down. Properties that you couldn't even see, now it's thinned out. Some properties have had all the trees taken off."

Some observers contend the firebreaks aren't the best way to protect communities.

Tom Bonnicksen, a professor at Texas A&M and visiting scholar for the Forest Foundation, a nonprofit group supported by the timber industry, said there should be only strategic firebreaks and more logging deeper in the forest.

The area also needs a mill that likely won't be built until the Forest Service agrees to 10-year logging contracts that provide enough time for a company to recoup its investments, Bonnicksen said.

"Even if we remove the dead trees, we still have a very serious problem," he said. "The entire forest is at risk whether it has dead trees in it or not."

Blackwell said the Forest Service favors shorter-term contracts because the forest might not be able to sustain logging beyond that. Environmental groups have also expressed concerns about giving the timber industry a long-term foothold.

Before last year's fires, Big Bear Lake resident Gini Wilson and her husband spent months trying to get permission to remove a hollowed-out tree they feared would fall. But when she called the fire department about a dead tree a few weeks ago, it was removed immediately, along with several others.

"The next week we were out of town and a neighbor told me they were taking one down in a snowstorm," Wilson said. "He says they're on top of things."

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U.S., Iraqi generals reach tentative deal

FALLUJAH, Iraq (AP) — U.S. Marines negotiated a "tentative" agreement Thursday to pull back forces from Fallujah, a deal that would lift a nearly monthlong siege and allow an Iraqi force led by a former Saddam Hussein-era general to handle security. Fresh clashes broke out despite news of a pending deal, and U.S. war-

planes dropped bombs on insurgent targets.

Ten U.S. soldiers and a South African civilian were killed in attacks elsewhere, including eight Americans who died when a bomb hit as they tried to clear explosives from a road south of Baghdad.

Negotiations were also taking place in the southern city of Najaf, where tribal leaders and police discussed a proposal to end the U.S. standoff and for followers of a radical Shiite cleric to leave the city.

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