Bark Beetle Emergency

Overview

Having removed more than 1.5 million dead, diseased and dying trees from the San Bernardino Mountains, the Mountain Area Safety Taskforce has shifted its focus to thinning green vegetation in strategic locations to help prevent catastrophic wildfires.

Because of the ongoing drought conditions, the moisture content of the trees and brush is low, leaving them vulnerable to fire and parasites. Thinning green vegetation not only reduces the fire danger, it helps restore the vigor of the drought-afflicted forest by freeing up more resources — water, minerals and sunlight — for the remaining trees and vegetation. This, in turn, helps to reduce the spread of bark beetle infestation.

Tree Mortality
The San Bernardino National Forest continues to experience significant drought-related vegetation mortality that is exacerbated by bark beetle infestation, increasing the danger of a catastrophic fire in the San Bernardino Mountains.

Before the late 1800s, frequent wildfires cleared the forest undergrowth, keeping the forest open and park-like. However, more than one hundred years of fire suppression and timber management have allowed more vegetation to grow and survive than the ecosystem can support. This, combined with the prolonged drought, resulted in too many plants and trees competing for too little moisture, leaving the trees highly susceptible to attack by bark beetles and other parasites.

Extreme Fire Danger
Because of these conditions — drought, overgrowth and bark beetle infestation — tens of millions of trees in the local mountains have died in recent years. These dead, diseased and dying trees pose an extreme fire hazard. Although bark beetles are indigenous to this region and are an integral part of ecosystem, trees weakened by nearly a decade of drought are unable to produce enough sap to expel the beetles. A stand of trees infested by bark beetles can die in a matter of weeks.

State of Emergency
Because of the fire hazard, in 2003 then-Gov. Gray Davis proclaimed a State of Emergency to exist within Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego counties. Local agencies were asked to expedite the clearing of dead, dying and diseased trees and other vegetation that interfere with emergency response and evacuation needs, and to redirect existing resources to assist landowners by giving forest stewardship advice and oversight of tree removal.

One Millionth Tree
In March 2007, the one-millionth tree in MAST's three-year effort to combat the bark beetle infestation and restore the health of the Angeles and San Bernardino forests was removed.

Hazardous trees continue to be removed, but the emphasis is now on thinning green vegetation.

Defensible Space
At the same time, MAST is urging property owners to maintain a 100-foot defensible space around their houses and other structures. This dramatically increases the chance of a structure surviving a wildfire, and it provides for firefighter safety when protecting homes during a wildland fire.

Hazardous Tree Removal
Mast members continue to remove dead and dying trees that pose an immediate danger to property, access roads or power lines. MAST expects the removal of hazardous trees registered by private property owners prior to the June 30, 2007, deadline to continue through the end of 2008.

Mountain Area Safety Taskforce
The Mountain Area Safety Taskforce (MAST) is a coalition of local, state and federal government agencies, private companies and volunteer organizations in San Bernardino County—including the Bernardino County Fire Department, U.S. Forest Service, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Natural Resources Conservation Service, San Southern California Edison, and Caltrans—that are concerned with public safety in the mountain areas of their respective jurisdictions.

The taskforce was formed in 2002 to coordinate fire prevention efforts in response to the large number of trees dying from the combined effects of a prolonged drought and bark beetle infestation.

Web Site
For more information about MAST, visit www.calmast.org.