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PEST INFESTATION

Fungi, beetles killing trees at coastal state park

By SHADI RAHIMI
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

A warm, dry spring is usually the ideal climate for visits to MacKerricher State Park near Fort Bragg.



But this year, some suspect the weather of producing perfect

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conditions for the rapid spread of beetle and fungi infestations in the coastal park.

Pine and shore trees began turning brown in February and then dying.

Park officials fretted about falling trees and forest fires. Rangers revved chain saws.

Now, at the start of the summer camping season, those diseased areas are graveyards of 700 stumps.

Trees were removed in spots throughout the park, and all campgrounds were affected, officials said.

The trees' remains are being sold as firewood.

The infestation threat is diminished for now, but concerns linger as warmer weather is suspected of helping boost insect and fungi populations.

This year alone, beetle species are believed to have destroyed more than 50,000 square miles of forest in Western Canada and contributed to the spread of tree disease in the United States, said Julie McNamee, the National Park Service's air quality liaison in Washington, D.C.

Beetles cannot survive cold weather, she said, "but because it's not as cold, we have been noticing hundreds and thousands of acres of trees are dying."

McNamee helps direct a national campaign to address climate change called "Climate Friendly Parks."

She said drought and a two-decade shift away from controlled burning to reduce forest density have also added to the increase in tree deaths. She expects the fire season to be longer this year because "it's drier and more trees are dying."

Local park officials also have been examining issues related to changing climate conditions, but now there's "heightened concern," said Morgan Zeitler, sector superintendent for State Parks' Mendocino District.

Zeitler said he "can't offer any direct smoking gun" as to



SCOTT MANCHESTER / PD

Angelo Frediani, 5, formerly of Sonoma and now living in Redding, jumps from stump to stump near his family's camp site last month at MacKerricher State Park near Fort Bragg. The park has had to remove about 700 trees believed to be attacked by beetles and bacterial fungus. Even though 700 trees were removed it was only a small number compared to the number of trees in the park and most campers thought that only a little on thinning had taken place. Scott Manchester / The Press Democrat (Photo by - Scott Manchester) Zoom Photo | Buy Photo ?

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whether a warmer climate contributed to the rapid deaths of the pine trees in MacKerricher's 2,299 acres.

But he believes the infestations found at the park were likely "climate-related or an offshoot of climate change."

Pine beetles, or *Dendroctonus ponderosae*, destroy trees by laying eggs under bark and carrying fungi into the wood. The tree cannot be saved once infested. At that point, it's just a matter of minimizing the spread, Zeitler said.

"It's been an ongoing problem. But what we're seeing is, apparently, it's accelerating," he said. "Even the forester was surprised."

State Forester Stephen Bakken determined which of MacKerricher's trees were dying and should be removed. For Bakken, the identifiable and constant threats to trees are the fragmentation of wild lands and the introduction of exotic species.

"There's no shortage of all kinds of plants coming in and diseases and animals and insects," he said. "It's a mess."

But attributing the recent weather pattern to climate change is "kind of stretching it," without tracking weather patterns for decades or even centuries, Bakken added.

In the meantime, Zeitler said, rangers and residents notice the North Coast feeling warmer, and that poses an immediate concern.

Fire personnel in Sonoma and Mendocino counties say they're gearing up for a longer season, fueled by the driest March-April on record.

"We had a few fires and warm dry days in the fall, which is not that common," Zeitler said. "People are beginning to look at these things and ask what kind of trend we're seeing."

MacKerricher rangers are hoping to replace the removed trees with seedlings grown in a greenhouse that is under construction. But as with many state programs facing budget cuts, funding is a problem, Zeitler said.



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"Anything that has an expense these days is competing with everything else," he said.

The greenhouse is being funded, in part, by the nonprofit Mendocino Land Trust, Zeitler said.

Proceeds from the firewood sales will go the Mendocino Area Parks Association, which paid Department of Corrections inmate work crews to split and remove the dead trees.

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