

102 Million Trees Have Died in California’s Drought



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Written by Lorraine Chow and republished with permission from EcoWatch.

California’s six years of drought has left 102 million dead trees across 7.7 million acres of forest in its wake, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) [announced](#) following an aerial survey. If that is not horrendous enough, 62 million trees died in the year 2016 alone—an increase of more than 100 percent compared to 2015.

In the photo below, all the dead trees are grey or orange.



Dead and dying trees on forest lands in California, August 2016. Photo Credit: USFS Region 5 Flickr

“The scale of die-off in California is unprecedented in our modern history,” Randy Moore, a forester for the U.S. Forest Service, told the [Los Angeles Times](#), adding that trees are dying “at a rate much quicker than we thought.”

“You look across the hillside on a side of the road, and you see a vast landscape of dead trees,” added Adrian Das, a U.S. Geological Survey ecologist whose office is located in Sequoia National Park. “It’s pretty startling.”

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Most of the dead trees are located in 10 counties in the southern and central Sierra Nevada region.

“Five consecutive years of severe drought in California, a dramatic rise in bark beetle infestation and warmer temperatures are leading to these historic levels of tree die-off,” the USFS said.

Forest Service experts believe that more trees will die in the coming months and years due to root diseases, bark beetle activity or other stress agents. The agency warned that tree deaths are on the rise in northern regions, especially in Siskiyou, Modoc, Plumas and Lassen counties.

The lack of rain and unseasonably high temperatures has added stress to the trees. These factors have made trees [increasingly vulnerable](#) to bark beetles infestations and disease.



Some have raised concerns that the staggering number of dead trees can fuel even bigger and more destructive [wildfires](#) in the Golden State.

Agriculture Sec. Tom Vilsack lamented that not enough resources are being invested into forest health and restoration.

“These dead and dying trees continue to elevate the risk of wildfire, complicate our efforts to respond safely and effectively to fires when they do occur, and pose a host of threats to life and property across California,” Vilsack said in a statement.

Not only that, researchers from the University of Washington [found](#) that large forest die-offs—from drought, heat, beetle infestations or deforestation—can significantly impact global [climate patterns](#) and alter vegetation on the other side of the world. The study was published this month in *PLOS ONE*.

“When trees die in one place, it can be good or bad for plants elsewhere, because it causes changes in one place that can ricochet to shift climate in another place,” said lead author Elizabeth Garcia. “The atmosphere provides the connection.”

In October 2015, California Gov. Jerry Brown declared the state’s unprecedented tree die-off a state of emergency. He formed a Tree Mortality Task Force to help mobilize additional resources for the safe removal of dead and dying trees.

However, some experts have suggested leaving the dead trees in the forests. Douglas Bevington, the forest program director for [Environment Now](#), [wrote](#) that dead trees are vital to forest ecosystems.

“Dead trees can remain standing for decades or more and a standing dead tree—known as a ‘snag’—provides great habitat for wildlife. Birds and mammals make their homes in openings carved within snags, while wood-boring insects that feed on snags provide the foundation of the food chain for a larger web of forest life, akin to plankton in the ocean,” he wrote.

“From the perspective of the timber industry, a snag in the forest is a waste, so timber companies and the Forest Service have spent decades cutting down snags as quickly as possible,” Bevington continued. “As a result, there is now a significant lack of snags in our forests and this shortage is harming woodpeckers, owls and other forest wildlife. For them, the recent pulse of snag creation is good news.”

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