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March 27, 2024

2023 Forest Health Report finds Defoliation down across the State
Spruce budworm activity has increased

Santa Fe, NM – Last year, forests in New Mexico got a break from drought and insect-related damage. According to data collected by the Energy Minerals and Natural Resources Department's Forestry Division and the USDA Forest Service, the effects of insects, disease, and drought-stress were down across the state from 2022, the last year the acres were surveyed.

Improved drought conditions in 2022 from a very strong monsoon and continued moisture in early 2023 may have been a contributing factor. When moisture is available, conifer trees are able to produce and sustain resin flow that they use to ward off insects and invaders.

One example of this improvement in drought conditions was the return of fall colors to the Aspen Vista area east of Santa Fe, ending a seven-year defoliation event brought on by western tent caterpillars.

"We're in a very different place than we were two years ago," said Victor Lucero, Forest Health Program Coordinator. "We found only 2,000 acres of tree mortality last year, as compared with 188,000 acres in 2022. Bark beetles were also at a record low across the state. However, bark beetle activity near burn scars was still observed late summer and early fall, and we're going to continue monitoring these areas throughout 2024."

Lucero explained that, even though mortality and defoliation from insects and pests decreased, the state's drought conditions became worse as 2023 stretched on. This could lead to a rise in drought-stress on trees, leaving them vulnerable to future insect attacks. The western spruce budworm continues to be the most severe defoliator of conifers at mid and high elevations. Population trends of this pest look to be on the increase, especially in the northern part of the state, which may predispose trees to bark beetle attack.

According to the Forestry Division, damage from insects, disease and drought-stress on forested lands decreased by 50% from 2022. However, in higher elevation forests, defoliation caused by western spruce budworm increased on state and private lands by 25%. Pinyon needle scale, as well as caterpillars of the Douglas-fir tussock moth also contributed to portions of defoliated acres.

The public can access the full report and additional information on the Forestry Division's Forest Health webpage, which includes the report and the Forest Health Conditions Data Dashboard.

Landowners are encouraged to contact their local Forestry Division District office to develop management plans that can lessen or prevent serious impacts from drought stress, insects and disease, while also curbing the potential for catastrophic wildfire.

Link to this press release here.

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