



U.S. Forest Service

DEAD PINE TREES on Laguna Mountain in the Cleveland National Forest. Many dehydrated and weakened trees, which are unable to produce enough protective resin, are being finished off by bark beetles.

STATE'S 'RED TREES'

The dangerous conditions statewide have forced firefighters to augment their staffing because any small fire can explode into a devastating blaze, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

In Pinnacles National Park, officials have banned fires about six to eight weeks earlier than usual because of the "very dry conditions," said Jan Lemons, a park

spokeswoman. There, the gray pines and chaparral are dying, she said.

Scott Stephens, a fire science professor at UC Berkeley, said fire suppression and harvesting have made forests more dense over the last 100 years. The increased density has made trees more vulnerable as they compete for limited amounts of water, with the weaker trees more susceptible to bark beetle infestations, he said.

"If the drought continues

for another two years or longer, I expect this mortality to move throughout the state," Stephens said. "Forests that once burned frequently with low-moderate intensity fire regimes are the most susceptible."

Moore, of the Forest Service, said the last time researchers saw so many trees dying was during the great drought of the 1970s.

At that time, the National Park Service did not conduct aerial surveys in

California, only ground reports, he said.

An estimated 14 million trees or more died between 1975 and 1979.

If the drought continues, the number of tree deaths could surpass that era, he said.

"The situation," Moore said, "is pretty severe."

veronica.rocha
@latimes.com
hailey.branson
@latimes.com