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Study Says Removing Dead Trees Doesn't Decrease Fire Severity

Beetle and drought-killed trees don't burn more severely than unaffected areas

By Ed Joyce September 23, 2009

Audio clip at: <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2009/sep/23/study-refutes-practice-removing-dead-trees/>



David McNew / Getty Images

Above: A U.S. Forest Service worker cuts down a drought-weakened cedar tree near Idyllwild, California.

A new study suggests that removing dead pine trees in Southern California forests will not reduce the severity of wildfires.

The researchers looked at two fires in 2003 that burned a large number of dead conifers in the San Bernardino Mountains. The trees were killed by insects and drought.

The Center for Biological Diversity study says removing dead trees from forest lands far from towns and power lines does not reduce the severity of wildfires.

Wildlife biologist Monica Bond, a co-author of the study who worked with the Center for Biological Diversity to analyze the two fires, said there was no correlation between the number of beetle and drought-killed trees and fire severity.

Bond said weather conditions, such as Santa Ana winds, play a larger role.

"Efforts to log out these big trees in order to reduce fire risk are counterproductive and are likely to be ineffective," Bond said.

She also said forest management practices, such as logging dead trees, are presumptions and not supported by research.

Bond said the study may help the Forest Service map out future fire prevention projects.

She also said wind, moisture, air temperature and other climatic conditions are likely determining fire severity in Southern California.