

## DEAD TREES FORCE FIRE CREWS TO SHIFT TACTICS

**ALBANY:** Vast stands of dead timber in the Western US have forced firefighters to shift tactics, trying to stay out of the shadow of lifeless, unstable trees that could come crashing down with deadly force. About 6.3 billion dead trees are still standing in 11 Western states, up from 5.8 billion five years ago, according to US Forest Service statistics compiled for The Associated Press.

Since 2010, a massive infestation of beetles has been the leading cause of tree mortality in the West and now accounts for about 20 percent of the standing dead trees, the Forest Service said. The rest were killed by drought, disease, fire or other causes. Researchers have long disagreed on whether beetle infestations have made wildfires worse, and this year's ferocious fire season has renewed the debate, with multiple fires burning in forests with beetle-killed trees.

But no one disputes that dead trees - snags, in firefighter parlance - present an unpredictable threat, prone to blowing over onto people or getting knocked down by other falling trees. Amid the noise and distraction of a fire, firefighters sometimes get little warning. "That's the scary thing about snags," said Ben Brack, a firefighter and public information officer on the Keystone Fire, which burned across a forest full of beetle-killed trees around the tiny communities of Albany and Keystone in southern Wyoming in July and August. "You don't always see them coming."

To avoid broad stands of beetle-killed trees, firefighters sometimes have to cut containment lines farther from the flames. That allows the fires to gobble up more forest before they're brought under control. "When we do that, fires get bigger, and often they burn longer," said Bill Hahnenberg, a veteran Forest Service incident commander who helped corral last year's Beaver Creek Fire in beetle-killed trees in northern Colorado and southern Wyoming. "So that's one of the trade-offs fire managers have had to go to."

### Safer approach

Firefighters used that tactic on both the Beaver Creek and Keystone fires. They're also using it on two big fires currently burning in beetle-killed trees in western Montana. "I'm very much in favor of it," said Mark Gunnerson, whose family owns three cabins in Keystone, one dating to 1870. "I would rather start over than one person get hurt." This summer's fire edged to within 40 feet of one of his family's cabins, but none was damaged.

Other factors, such as rugged terrain or drought-baked forests, can prompt fire managers to take a safer, less aggressive approach to minimize the danger. They say it's impossible to know how much bigger fires grow because of that. The Beaver Creek Fire scorched nearly 60 square miles and burned for about four months. The Keystone Fire was discovered July 3 and contained in mid-August, after blackening 4 square miles.

No deaths or injuries were reported in either fire. But since 1987, at least 13 US firefighters have been killed and five injured by falling dead trees, according to reports gathered by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group, a coalition of federal, tribal, state and professional firefighting organizations. Massive forest die-offs have occurred before, researchers say, and even healthy forests have standing dead trees. John Shaw, a Forest Service analyst, said the percentage of dead trees can vary widely over decades. About 17 percent of all standing trees in 11 Western states are dead, roughly double the proportion in the 1990s but that was a time of above-normal precipitation, Shaw said. Since 2000, two dozen species of beetles have killed trees on nearly 85,000 square miles in the Western US. That's an area about the size of Utah. Beetles have killed nearly 80,000 square miles of forest in Western Canada.

### Aging forests

The outbreak stems from a combination of factors, including crowded, aging forests, drought-stressed trees and warmer temperatures that allow the pests to survive the winters, researchers say. The bugs bore under a tree's bark, where they lay their eggs and release a blue fungus. The newly hatched larvae eat away a thin layer below the bark that the tree needs to transport nutrients, and the fungus cuts off the flow of water. — AP



**TECATE:** View of an artwork by French artist JR on the US-Mexico border in Tecate, California. — AFP

## CALIFORNIA VOWS TO FIGHT FOR MIGRANT 'DREAMERS'

STATE PROTESTING MAJOR SETBACK TO THEIR ECONOMY

**LOS ANGELES:** Donald Trump's move to scrap an amnesty for hundreds of thousands of young immigrants risks costing the US economy dearly, experts warn, and nowhere is this truer than in California which has promised a fierce fight to protect its "Dreamers." The Golden State is home to more than a quarter of the 800,000 recipients of the Obama-era program that shielded from deportation migrants brought illegally to the US as children, many of whom know no other home.

Gabriel Chin, a law professor at the UC Davis School of Law, says the program's phase-out, announced on Tuesday, promises to be "devastating" for the country's most populous state. "The uncertainty of their status, and the possibility of their removal, will put a pall over many parts of the state, and threaten serious economic and human consequences," he warned.

According to a January study by the Center for American Progress, California alone would lose \$11.3 billion per year with the ending of the program known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA—more than any other US state. Officials in the state made their position clearly known, as Trump's repeal of the program implemented by president Barack Obama threw the future of its recipients into serious doubt.

"California will sue the Trump Administration over its termination of the DACA program for one simple reason," Xavier Becerra, the state's attorney general who is himself of Mexican descent, said in a statement. "Our state has become the world's 6th largest economy due in part to the success of over 200,000 Dreamers whose livelihoods have been put at risk by President Trump's wrong-headed decision on DACA."

The so-called "Dreamers"—many Hispanic, now in their twenties and having known no other country but the United States—will have somewhere between six and 24 months before they lose their protected status and become subject to potential deportation. In scrapping DACA, Trump urged Congress to settle the Dreamers' legal status—but the chances of divided lawmakers reaching a long-elusive agreement within months appear dim. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti

likewise vowed his city would defend DACA recipients from a "cruel" decision. "They belong here. And we'll fight for them to stay."

### 'Considerable investment'

In California—the US state with the largest immigrant population and where Hispanics outnumber whites—tens of thousands of young Dreamers live and work in the agricultural Central Valley, but an even greater number live in Los Angeles. One-third are students, and could find themselves forced back into the shadows, abandoning their education and career plans.

"Dreamers have earned diplomas, been able to open a bank account, get a mortgage, bought cars," said California's state Senate leader Kevin de Leon, who is of Guatemalan descent. "They represent a bright future for our state." Louis Desipio, professor of political science at UC Irvine, notes that the state of California has made a "considerable investment" in educating many of these young people. "If they can't work up to the levels that their skills dictate, this investment is not going to pay off as well as it has in the past," he argued.

Thousands of DACA supporters have marched in Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego in recent days, while California schools and universities pledged to protect students from the threat of deportation, offering legal advice and counseling. Silicon Valley titans including Apple, Facebook and Google have loudly condemned the dismantling of the amnesty program.

### What can be done?

Major Californian cities San Francisco, Los Angeles and Berkeley have already clashed with the Trump administration by declaring themselves "sanctuaries" for undocumented migrants, and refusing to fully cooperate with immigration authorities. Experts note however that state authorities have limited room for maneuver, considering that US immigration policy is set at the federal level. So what can be done? — AFP