

Drought-stressed Calif. forests face a radical shift

By Thomas Curwen, Los Angeles Times

Biologist Greg Asner first heard the numbers in April, but they did little to prepare him for what he saw.

The Forest Service had estimated that nearly 12.5 million trees in the state's southern and central forests were dead. But as Asner peered down upon the same forests from his airplane at 6,000 feet, he saw something far worse.

California's drought-parched landscape was poised for a radical transformation. Much of the low-elevation forests near Mt. Pinos in the Los Padres National Forest and in Pinnacles National Park were going to disappear if trends continued.

A scientist with the Carnegie Institution for Science, Asner has a practiced eye for forest health, and with instruments aboard his plane that give him X-ray eyes into the foliage, he is able to assess not just dead trees but trees so stressed by the drought that their death is likely.

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