

Science of wildfires and tree-killing beetles

By Tara Lohan, KQED-TV

So far this year 4,636 wildfires in California have burned more than 200,000 acres. That's more fires than this time last year and more fires than the five-year average. In fact, in the last few decades, the number of large fires are on the rise across the Western United States and the length of the fire season continues to expand.

There are some areas, particularly in parts of the southern Sierra Nevada, where up to 85 percent of the large trees are dead or dying.

One of the biggest reasons for this is warming temperatures, which are impacting snowpack and ushering in an earlier spring. California has an added challenge of dealing with a five-year drought. The drought and climate change have allowed bark beetles to get the upper hand in swathes of forest in the Sierra Nevada, creating what ecologists call "pulses" of tree mortality. To the average person it looks like a lot of red needles on dead trees.

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