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Thousands of dead trees pose extreme fire risk in Lamorinda

By Nick Marnell



Dying Monterey pines clustered near Briones Reservoir in Orinda. Photo Nick Marnell

You do not have to drive very far in Lamorinda before you see dead or dying trees. "I removed thousands of dead trees in Lamorinda last year," said Brian Gates of Expert Tree Service in Orinda. "By summer, there will be thousands more."

And that is precisely what officials of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District fear: That thousands of dead trees, particularly Monterey pines, will mar the district landscape, adding yet another hazard to a potentially catastrophic fire season ahead.

The problem of dead and dying trees is not restricted to the summer. Tom Smith of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection toured the Northern California region in December, stunned at the number of sick and dying bay laurel and Monterey pine trees. "There is a lot of death and destruction here," he said.

Residents of Moraga and Orinda have recently reported hundreds of these dead trees to the fire district. "There was enough of an uptick that we took notice," said MOFD Fire Marshal Jeff Isaacs, who plans to ramp up enforcement of tree removal this year. "Dead trees equal dead fuel. Even a healthy Monterey pine drops a lot of material, and it can land on a roof. When Monterey pines are dying, it's dead fuel dropping."

Adding to the nuisance value of Monterey pine trees, the U.S. Forest Service says that Monterey pine wood is light, soft, and coarse grained, with little commercial value in the United States except as fuel wood.

According to the fire district, the red needles from Monterey pines will dry as summer approaches. The needles are highly flammable, and when fire climbs into the tree, the needles can detach and become firebrands or embers, capable of igniting downwind fires. These spot fires can start anytime, with burning embers landing in fuel beds and carrying as far away as a mile.

Trees die largely due to old age, lack of water or "forest pests," Isaacs said. When Monterey pines get dehydrated, the pine bark beetles attack, setting the stage for the trees' demise.

"Dead trees can overwhelm the system come spring and summer," Isaacs said. "Dead trees unattended are a violation of the fire code. They can make fire season even worse."

To keep the dead tree problem from spiraling out of control into fire season, fire district employees will begin their annual vegetation management inspections in the spring and issue citations for properties that are not in compliance.

Isaacs urged residents to assess their property for pines with telltale red needles and arrange for tree removal as soon as possible before demand spikes in the spring and summer.



Dying Monterey pines in an Orinda back yard. Photo Nick Marnell



Removal of eucalyptus tree on Camino Pablo in Orinda Jan. 11. Photo Nick Marnell

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