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Officials try to avert Tahoe beetle infestation

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Foresters have issued a "call to action" to prevent further spread of a major bark beetle epidemic, with targeted land including the Lake Tahoe area and other parts of the Sierra.

About 2.4 million acres of "high priority" at risk of being overrun by beetles have been identified for potential treatment by the Council of Western State Foresters. Much of the land is in the Sierra and near communities where widespread tree mortality could produce extreme fire danger.

"The Tahoe Basin is a perfect spot" to try and get ahead of a beetle infestation that threatens about 22 million acres of forest across the West," said Pete Anderson, Nevada's state forester and chairman of the forestry council. The estimated cost of treating the 2.4 million acres is at least \$300 million over five years, Anderson said.

Vast swaths of timber in places Colorado and Montana have been invaded by beetles, with millions of acres affected. Recent drought, which makes trees more susceptible to beetle attack, has worsened the situation and put the Sierra at risk.

Experts say an opportunity exists to defend forests in the Sierra, other parts of Northern California, Washington and Oregon, Anderson said. "We're looking at areas where we think we can cut them off," Anderson said. "We're trying to target where we can do the most good."

Thinning overgrown forests is the most effective way to avoid beetle infestation "so you don't have a host," Anderson said. Spraying chemicals also can be effective in the early stages of infestation, he said. Signs of local attacks by mountain pine beetles emerged last year in pockets of timber near Mount Rose and elsewhere along the Carson Range, including near Heavenly Mountain Resort near South Lake Tahoe and in the Little Valley area between Reno and Carson City.

In the wake of two drier-than-normal winters, the potential of a third increases the chance beetles will proliferate across the region, said Gail Durham, forest health specialist for NDF.

A healthy tree can easily fend off attacks by a few beetles by secreting resin and essentially booting the bugs out of its bark. But when trees are unhealthy in overcrowded stands, particularly when stressed by drought, their defense mechanisms are weakened.

Beetles attack successfully and while doing so, secrete perfume-like pheromones that attract hordes of invaders. The insects kill trees by chewing through bark and introducing harmful fungi, interfering with movement of water and nutrients. The scope of the West's current infestation is so great that foresters must target specific areas for treatment, Anderson said.

"We cannot, and should not try, to treat all the acres affected," Anderson said. "That is why the assessment lays out a plan for prioritization, looking at all the factors at risk."

As a “national priority,” Lake Tahoe may be in a strong position to secure some of the \$300 million needed to prevent infestation and reduce resulting fire danger, Anderson said. About \$75 million has already been spent treating about 500,000 acres of western forests.

“The problem is way larger than we have funding for,” he said. “There’s way more bugs than money.” During a lengthy drought from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, bark beetles posed serious problems in the Sierra. About 30 percent of the pines and firs in the Lake Tahoe Basin alone were killed.
