Fire Environment Statement

Southwest Geographic Area

South and Central New Mexico and Southeast Arizona

Issued 3/5/2026 Valid till 4/15/2026

Subject: Prolonged drought conditions are causing significant and widespread tree mortality and stress across forests in South and Central New Mexico, and Southeast Arizona. This includes a major dieback with extensive mortality in oaks, pines, and junipers.

Discussion: A critical shift in fuels conditions is underway across Central New Mexico, Southern New Mexico, and Southeast Arizona due to severe and prolonged drought, often D2 (Severe) to D4 (Exceptional) over the past two years. This has caused widespread tree mortality and stress in diverse forest types, from mid-elevation woodlands (4,500 feet) to higher elevation pine forests (9,000 feet).

Photo 1: Close up view of pine and oak mortality in Peloncillo Mountains

Photo 2: Landscape view of die-off in Peloncillo Mountains

Difference from Normal Conditions: Extensive mortality is observed in oaks, various pines, and juniper, with bark beetle attacks dramatically surging, leading to thousands of acres of pine mortality. Juniper and oak crown dieback are also increasing, exacerbated by fungal pathogens. This widespread mortality is significantly increasing standing dead red needle trees as well as dead and down fuels creating extensive areas of dead fuel continuity across the area of concern at mid-elevations.

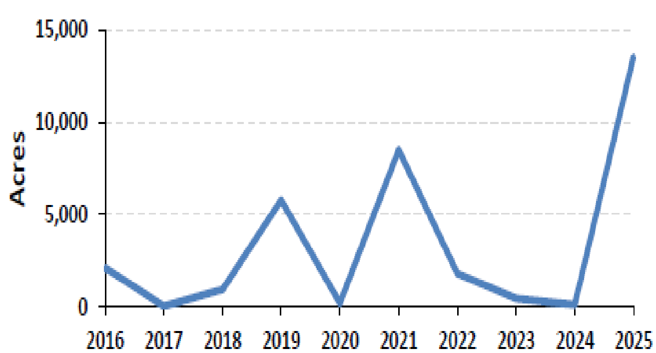


Figure 1: Ten-year trend of acres with Apache, Chihuahua, ponderosa, and Arizona pine mortality on the Coronado National Forest

Photo 3: Juniper, pinyon, oak and other mortality observed during 2025 Insect and Disease Survey

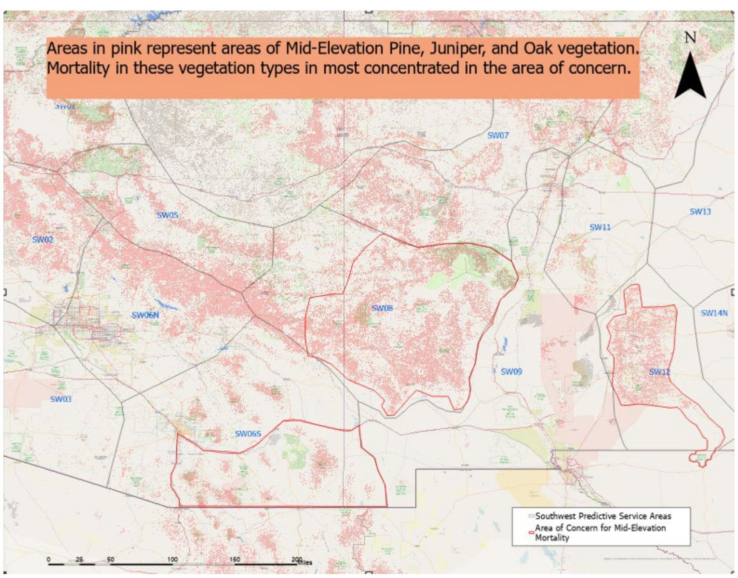
Concerns to Firefighters and the Public:

- **Increased Fuel Loading and Continuity:** Widespread mortality significantly increases the amount of dead and dry woody fuels, both on the ground and standing, creating heavy and continuous fuel beds that lead to higher fire potential.
- **Enhanced Fire Intensity and Severity:** The abundance of dead pinyon, juniper, and oak trees and their debris contribute to hotter, more intense fires that are harder to control.
- **Greater Potential for Crown Fire:** Dead pinyon and juniper, with their volatile foliage, and dead oak branches can act as effective ladder fuels, increasing the likelihood of fire moving into tree crowns, leading to rapid, high-intensity crown fires.
- **Hazard Trees (Snags) for Firefighters:** Standing dead pinyon, juniper, and oak trees (snags) are unstable and prone to falling unexpectedly, posing a significant and unpredictable hazard to firefighters working near or under them during suppression efforts.
- **Increased Spotting Distances:** Dead and dry pinyon, juniper, and oak material can easily be lofted as embers, leading to longer-distance spotting and the rapid development of new fires ahead of the main fire, making containment more challenging.
- **Conventional Tactic Might Not Be Effective:** Higher rates of spread and fire intensity will make traditional firefighting tactics less effective (i.e. direct attack will be ineffective at lower wind speeds than usual, more embers will be generated from firing operations than normal)

Mitigation Measures: How firefighters and fire managers should be prepared to deal with each of the specific circumstances listed above. May include bullets:

- Use of indirect strategies and firing operations may be needed to reduce potential spotting.
- Stay alert for abrupt changes in fire weather and be prepared to respond quickly; be able to respond to wind shifts and unanticipated changes in direction of spread.
- Local briefings need to be thorough and highlight specific fire environment conditions.
- Lookouts, both on the ground and in the air, can help identify the initiation and location of crown fire. Fire behavior they encounter this year may exceed previous experiences due to the large extent of standing dead fuels.
- Implement hazard tree (snag) identification and felling protocols along all operational routes, within established control lines, and around safety zones to protect personnel from falling debris.

Area of Concern: Includes portions of Gila, Las Cruces, and Albuquerque BLM Districts along with Coronado, Apache-Sitgreaves, Gila, Cibola, and Lincoln National Forests and NM and AZ state and private lands.



Issued By: SW Decision Support Committee, SWCC Predicative Services, and Local Unit Collaborators.