

'Time bomb': Tree-killing bugs threaten France's lush forests

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NEW DELHI: France is grappling with a new ecological challenge as it battles an invasion of bark beetles in the scenic forest of La Teste-de-Buch, located in the Gironde region in the southwest. These destructive beetles are now infesting weakened pine trees, which were previously ravaged by devastating wildfires last year, reported AFP.

Matthieu Cabaussel, one of the custodians responsible for managing La Teste-de-Buch's private forest, described the year 2023 as another significant setback, following the tragic wildfires of the previous year.

The stenographer bark beetle, a small brown insect with a wingspan of half a centimeter, primarily targets pine trees that have already been damaged by fire or severe storms. The beetles lay their eggs in the tree's bark, and once hatched, the larvae burrow into the tree's trunk, ultimately causing the tree's demise. In an area where majestic 250-year-old maritime pines once stood, the forest now resonates with the sound of machinery as workers engage in tree felling, pruning, cutting, and removing trees that have fallen victim to these parasites.

According to AFP, Throughout track 214, which traverses the La Teste-de-Buch forest, stacks of logs accumulate, symbolizing a new environmental peril in a region still reeling from the destruction of approximately 30,000 hectares (74,100 acres) of forest due to wildfires the previous year.

Experts emphasize the necessity of tree removal to combat the bark beetle infestations, a problem that extends beyond La Teste-de-Buch, affecting other forests in eastern France and Eastern Europe as well.

"Cutting affected trees is the only way to fight this," Francis Maugard, natural risks manager at the National Forests Office (ONF), a government agency, told AFP.

Pheromone traps were utilized by Maugard to gauge the extent of the infestation. Near the renowned Dune of Pilat, which happens to be Europe's tallest sand dune, ONF promptly initiated a tree-felling campaign within La Teste's national forest, where approximately half of the forest had succumbed to wildfires.

The removal of around 80,000 cubic meters of wood took place, which is equivalent to the amount that would typically be harvested over the span of two decades. However, in the case of the private forest, which suffered extensive damage with almost 3,800 hectares scorched in the wildfires, the response was not as swift, and tree-cutting activities only commenced in January.

Herve Jactel, associated with the French National Institute for Agriculture, Food, and Environment (INRAE), expressed criticism for such an approach, deeming it as "ineffective management." Jactel, who serves as a research director at the institute's BioGeCo laboratory, also raised concerns regarding the storage of infested wood within the forest.

"It was the ideal breeding environment," he said, noting that bark beetles have also reproduced faster due to the high summer temperatures.

"This is a real time bomb," he said. "If we do nothing, spring 2024 will be a thousand times more dangerous."

Cabaussel, involved in the management of La Teste-de-Buch's private forest, acknowledged several challenges, such as the high temperatures and reduced demand, which have impeded the process of removing the infested trees.

By late October, approximately 270,000 tons of wood had already been removed from the private forest, with at least double that amount yet to be harvested.

Cabaussel's intention is to implement all required measures, which include tree cutting during the winter season when the bark beetles are dormant, in order to protect the nearby forests.

The infestation of the bark beetles has even extended into the urban areas of La Teste, necessitating the removal of pine trees from residents' gardens.

"There is a risk of population explosion," said Francois Hervieu, Regional Directorate for Food, Agriculture and Forestry (DRAAF), but added that the threat was manageable.

"We are in a situation which requires the greatest vigilance to evacuate the trees in due time."

The ADDUFU, a community organization with historical rights to harvest wood from the forest, has requested the establishment of specific sites for the proper storage and removal of wood.

"There is still a huge amount of wood to be taken out and we are afraid," said Philippe Fur, vice president at ADDUFU. He feared that the problem would only worsen in the future.

"The disaster that we've suffered is serious because we will not see an old forest in our lifetime again," Cabaussel said.

"But the forest ecosystems will recover very well."

In the decimated woods of La Teste-de-Buch, nature is already reclaiming its rights -- small pine saplings have popped up amid the charred tree stumps and ferns.