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Drying and dying

Years of drought are taking a toll on scores of state park's mighty oaks

By Anne Krueger

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The bark on the sawed-off sections of tree trunk is pocked with holes where woodpeckers once stored their acorns.

The pine tree at Cuyamaca Rancho State Park once served as a home and food-storage space for birds and squirrels. Now the tree, several hundred years old, is just a stump about 6 feet in diameter.

"When I see this tree go, I see a big refrigerator for the birds that isn't going to be used anymore," said park ranger Erik Thompson.

The October wildfires bypassed the 25,000-acre park north of Descanso, but its trees still are suffering as a result of the 2003 wildfires and years of drought. Some trees that showed signs of green after they were singed in the Cedar fire are now dying because of the drought.

Kim Marsden, a resource ecologist for the state parks, said she marked 257 trees for trimming or removal at Cuyamaca Rancho State Park last year. Trees that are potentially hazardous to visitors or park buildings are marked.

The contract to remove the trees was delayed, and in October, Marsden surveyed the park's trees again. She found an additional 104 trees that were dead or dying. All but one are oak trees, she said.

Marsden said she hasn't seen signs the trees are diseased.

"We're a little concerned over the death of oaks that seemed to have survived the Cedar fire," she said.

Park maintenance workers do much of the work, and 112 of the trees are being trimmed or removed under a \$140,000 contract with Baja Pacific, a tree service company. The work was set to begin in October, but the wildfires delayed the project.

County workers also are removing 20 oak trees at the Cuyamaca Outdoor School, where many San Diego County sixth-graders spend a week at camp.

In the park's Green Valley campground, tree after tree is spray-painted with a blue number, indicating it will be removed.

As Thompson drove around the campground, he noticed other trees that have died but don't have a number painted on them.

"They're dying faster than we can mark them," he said.

About half of the 81 campsites at Green Valley were closed because they



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
Erik Thompson, a ranger at Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, stood next to trees in the Green Valley campground that were cut down as potential hazards. "When I see this (pine) tree go, I see a big refrigerator for the birds that isn't going to be used anymore," Thompson said.



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