



## Cibola National Forest and National Grasslands

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# Tussock Moth Outbreak Resulting in Tree Defoliation

## Sandia Ranger District

**Albuquerque, NM, July 15, 2024** – If you are viewing brownish-red discoloration of trees on the eastern slopes of the Sandia Mountains primarily south of the Crest Hwy. (NM-536), it may be the result of defoliation from the Douglas-fir tussock moth. The defoliation occurs within mixed conifer stands affecting Douglas-fir and white fir trees.



To the casual observer, the affected trees may appear to be dying, but those brown branches signal the outbreak of the Douglas-fir tussock moth, a native defoliator whose larvae (i.e., caterpillars) feed on the foliage of a variety of trees species. The caterpillar feeds on the previous year's needles often resulting in defoliation, which weakens affected trees and may be followed by subsequent attacks by bark beetles that may kill the tops or entire trees.

Douglas-Fir tussock moth is experiencing a rise in population on the Sandia Ranger District. The caterpillars have thousands of tiny hairs covering their bodies. The female moths, egg masses, and cocoons also have hairs, which can cause tussockosis, an allergic reaction from direct skin contact with the insects themselves or their airborne hairs. Symptoms may include itchiness, skin rashes, skin irritation, watery eyes, runny nose, and sneezing. More severe reactions, though less common, include blisters, coughing, shortness of breath, wheezing, and chest tightness. Tussockosis severity may vary between individuals, by the amount of exposure, and the level of the outbreak. Everyone should avoid touching or handling this insect, in any of its forms! If contact does occur, immediately wash the area of exposure. If

symptoms become severe or problematic, immediately seek medical care.

Forest Service Entomologist Dr. Steven Souder said, “Trees may recover from early infestations which can look quite dramatic; however, multiple seasons of repeated defoliation can predispose trees to disease and other insects causing tree mortality.” Trees that regrow their needles will put out new shoots over the summer that will appear more bronze than gold in the fall. In old trees or trees stressed by the elements, the caterpillar can hasten mortality, but may survive this annual harbinger of summer in the southwest.



The Forest Service will be conducting its annual aerial surveys over the Sandias within the next several weeks to track the damage done by Tussock Moths and other insects in the Cibola National Forest. Additional ground truthing will also be conducted to confirm presence and develop treatment options.

Private landowners who are witnessing damage to trees on their property from the Tussock Moth may contact Victor Lucero, Forest Health Program Coordinator with NM Forestry Division, to discuss treatment options.

<https://www.emnrd.nm.gov/sfd/forest-health/> [Victor.Lucero@emnrd.nm.gov](mailto:Victor.Lucero@emnrd.nm.gov)

*FS Photo: 2024 - Oso Corredor Trail SE of Tree Springs Trailhead - Sandia Ranger District.*

*Photo: Douglas-Fir Tussock Moth caterpillar*

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