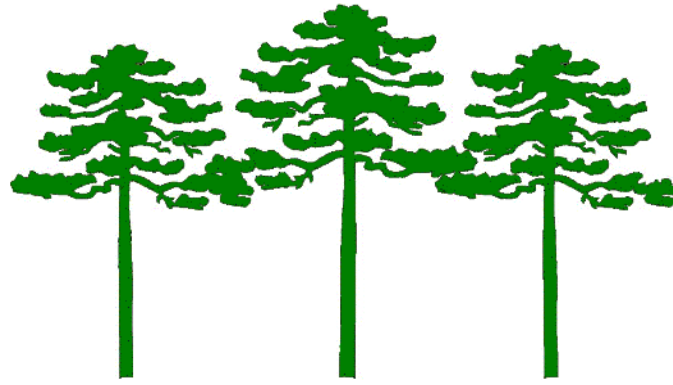




Florida Forest Service

Forest Health Highlights 2025



Forests of Florida

Florida's forests are expansive and diverse and include subtropical systems, baldcypress wetlands, pine flatwoods, pine-oak scrubs, gum-cypress swamps, coastal mangroves, isolated hardwood hammocks, and more extensive upland hardwoods. The state's mild climate, tourism industry, and many ports of entry also make it particularly vulnerable to the introduction and spread of non-native invasive species. Challenges to forest health in the Sunshine State are therefore myriad and complex. What follows is only a small sample of notable examples of Florida's forest pest and disease-related activities and scenarios from 2025.

Forest Health Section

The Forest Health Section is the part of the Florida Forest Service (FFS) focused on pests, diseases, invasive plants, and other disorders that impact forests and shade trees statewide. They provide assistance and information to a wide range of private landowners, public land managers, and other stakeholders. They also survey and monitor pests, diseases, and other causes of forest damage, and conduct a range of related projects and programs. The FH Section's staff offered at least 29 presentations, workshops, field events, and training seminars in the 2024-2025 federal fiscal year, to approximately 984 attendees. They also recorded 902 activities in the form of survey observations, identifications, diagnoses, and management recommendations regarding forest-health-related incidents statewide, not including hurricane damage survey work. (Figure 1). This included the documentation of 5 new county records and 4 new host records.

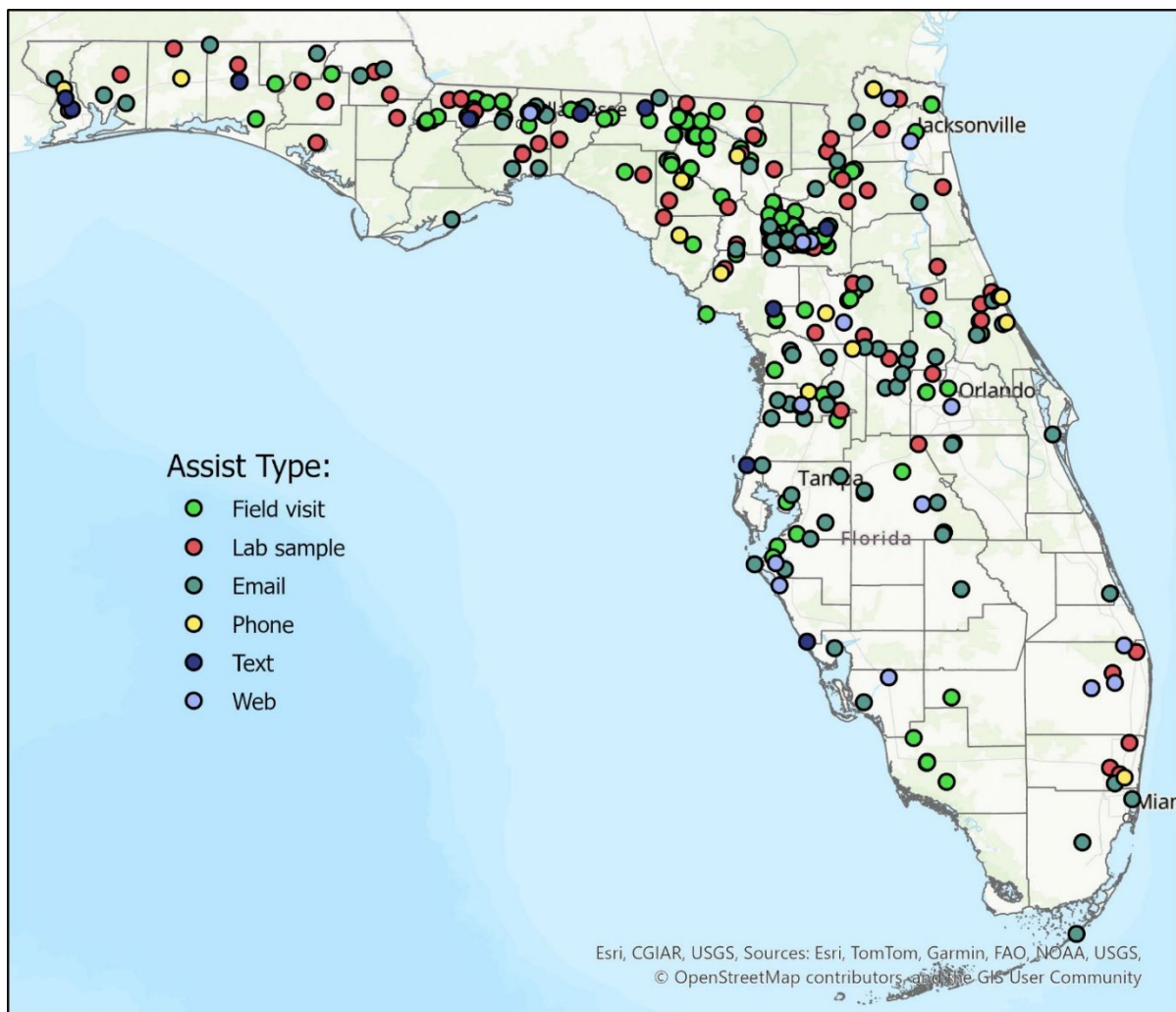


Figure 1. Locations of incidents reported and assists performed by FFS Forest Health Section Staff, from October 1, 2024 to September 30, 2025.

Southern Pine Beetle (SPB)

Southern pine beetle (*Dendroctonus frontalis*) is one of the most important forest pests in the Southeast, periodically experiencing outbreaks in which large areas of pines are rapidly attacked and killed. Trapping and aerial survey programs are conducted annually in Florida to monitor SPB populations and detect infestations where they occur (Figure 2). No active SPB infestations were detected in Florida in 2024. In 2025, five active spots were found in a small area of Gadsden County, infesting areas of high-density loblolly pine on private lands (Figure 3). These infestations were small (totaling less than 15 acres combined), and slow-moving. This relatively slight activity contrasts with the serious, large-scale SPB outbreaks that have been occurring in neighboring states since 2024.

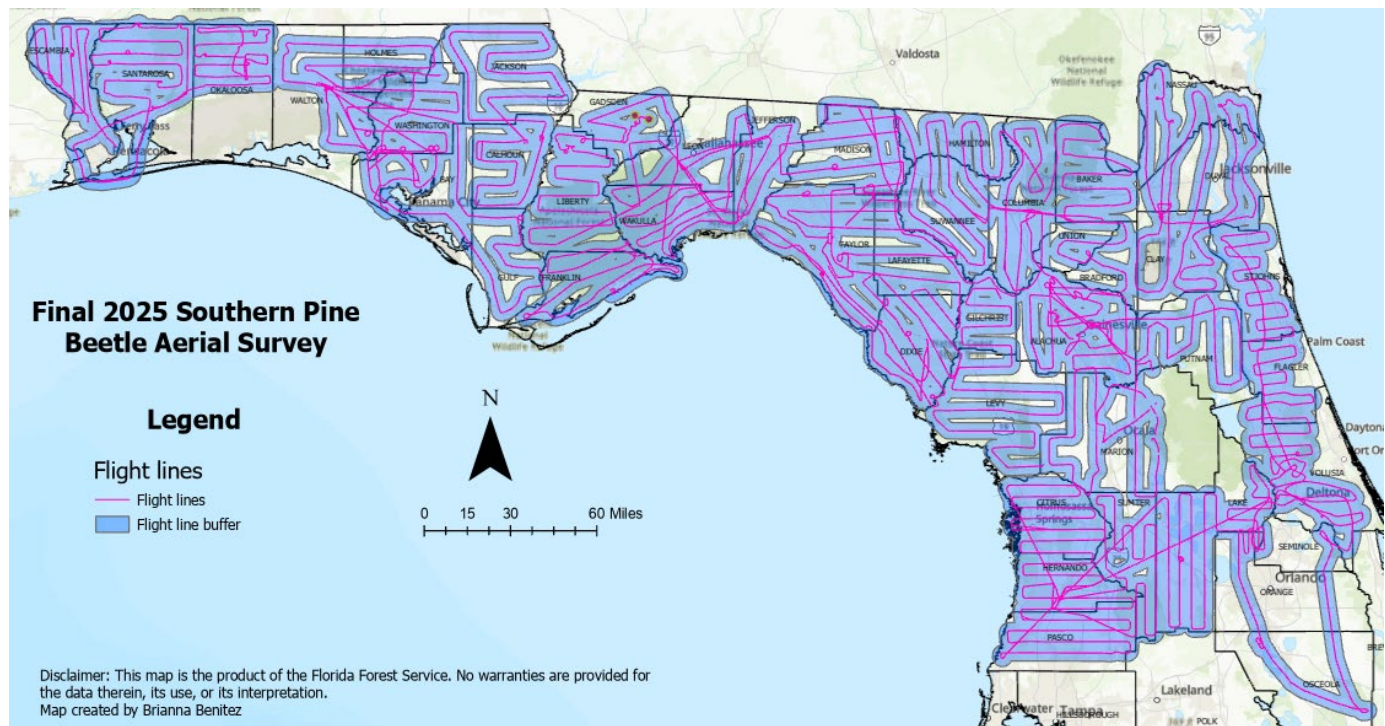


Figure 2. Flight paths covered by the SPB Aerial Survey program in Florida from April to November 2025.



Figure 3. Left: Defensive resin flow (“pitch tubes”) on the bark of a loblolly pine infested with southern pine beetle. Center: Bark peeled back to reveal the tunneling (gallery) patterns of SPB. Right: An area of pines killed by SPB in Gadsden County.

Post-hurricane and Drought-related Mortality and Associated Pest Activity

The region of North Florida that was impacted by Hurricanes Debby, Helene, and Milton in 2024 continued to see evidence of residual stress and damage sustained during the storms through the end of 2025. During this period, much of the state was also under severe to extreme drought conditions. The combination of these environmental stress factors led to unusually high levels of tree decline and mortality in many parts of these state, particularly seen in pine trees. Ongoing tree mortality was also observed in coastal areas that had been inundated with storm surge saltwater flooding during the storms.

This pine mortality was usually associated with infestations of stress-responding pine bark beetles, including the pine engraver beetles (*Ips* spp.) and the black turpentine beetle (*Dendroctonus terebrans*) (Figure 4). These are species that commonly attack pines that are already severely stressed, dying, or recently dead, and they rarely attack trees that are otherwise healthy. Thus, elevated activity of these bark beetles is commonly seen both during severe drought periods and in the years following a major hurricane, and it naturally subsides as the remaining trees recover and the environmental conditions improve.



Figure 4. Left: A pine stand in Lafayette County with many trees still leaning from wind experienced in the 2024 hurricanes, and some trees still freshly wilted and dying. Right: Characteristic tunneling pattern (galleries) of *Ips* pine engraver beetles.

Another, less-familiar pest outbreak scenario was commonly seen in the hurricane-impacted regions of Florida in 2025: severe feeding damage from pine reproduction weevils, including the pales weevil (*Hylobius pales*) and the pitch-eating weevil (*Pachylobius picivorus*). These are species that are traditionally associated with damage to pine seedlings that were planted too soon after a tract has been clearcut, as adult weevils that are attracted to the cut stumps for breeding material will feed on twigs and shoots of the seedlings.

However, in the hurricane-impacted regions in 2025, these weevils became so abundant that their adult twig-feeding behavior caused serious damage to well-established trees on sites adjacent to areas where odors of dead pine trees were strongest: recent salvage clearcuts, un-salvaged areas where many pines had died due to hurricane stress, and near mills that process pine timber (Figure 5). This feeding was severe enough in some regions that pines of all size classes were impacted, and even large, mature trees were damaged, disfigured, and killed.



Figure 5. Left: Longleaf pine branch with damage typical of pine reproduction weevils. Right: Severely damaged young trees in a pine plantation near a wood processing mill.

Lethal Bronzing Disease Forest Survey

Lethal bronzing (LB) is a disease previously known as Texas Phoenix Palm Decline that is caused by the pathogen currently known as *Candidatus Phytoplasma aculeata* (strain 16SrIV-D). This insect-vectored phytoplasma can kill many species of palm trees in Florida, including the native cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*) and the endemic scrub palmetto (*S. etonia*) as well as a wide range of ornamental species. The impact of this disease has been well documented in nurseries, pastures, urban residential areas and other developed settings, but its potential impact in forests is largely unknown. The FFS Forest Health Section has begun a project to survey forests near areas where the LBD pathogen is known to be active and determine the degree to which this invasive pathogen is impacting native forest palms. Field sampling for this project began in earnest in 2025, with 355 data collected and 77 samples collected from symptomatic palms and tested with PCR (Figure 6).

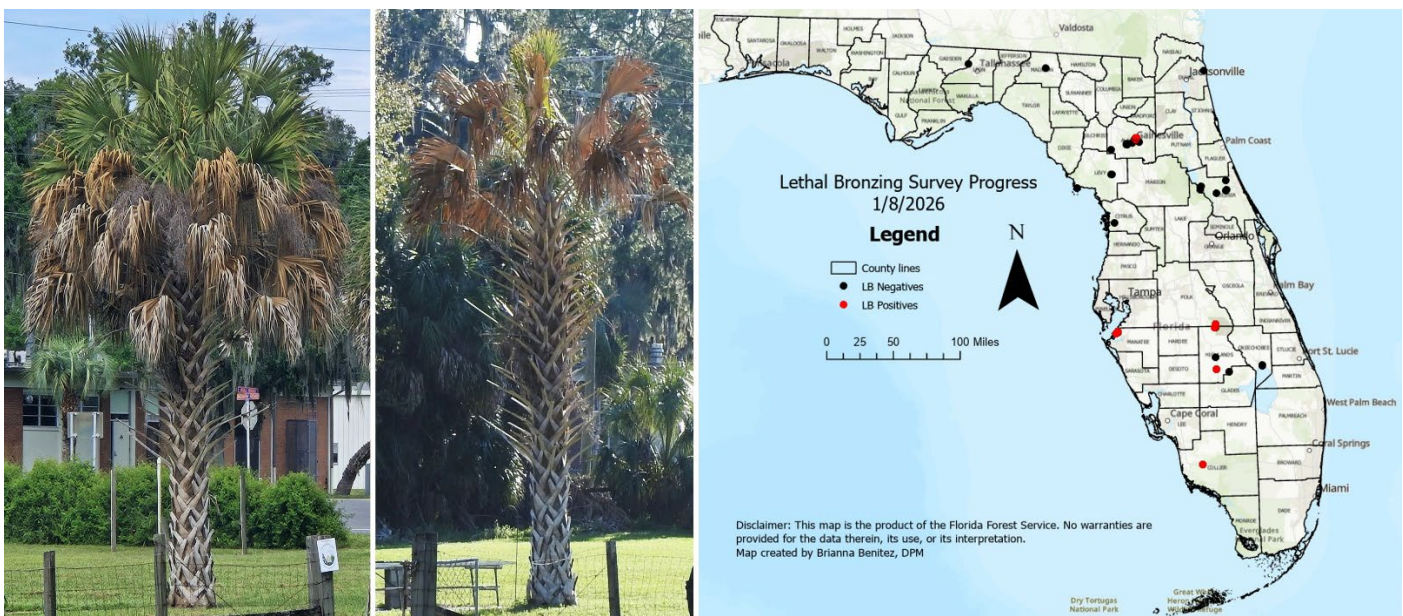


Figure 6. A cabbage palm showing early (left) and late (center) symptoms of lethal bronzing infection. Right: Sampling locations for the lethal bronzing forest impact survey.

Relámpago Blight

The FFF Forest Health Section has continued to collaborate with other state and university specialists to investigate a newly discovered fungal tree disease known as “relámpago blight” (caused by the fungus *Parvodontia relampaga*). Although it has currently only caused the death of small trees and branch dieback on larger ones, much about the potential impact of this fungus (as well as its origin and biology) is still largely undetermined. The Forest Health Section surveyed an estimated 206 acres and recorded 25 new survey observations for relámpago blight this fiscal year, including 3 new county records and 3 new host records.



Figure 7. Left: The relámpago blight fungus growing on the undersides of leaves and twigs. Center: Oak tree stem with white mycelial threads of the relámpago blight fungus. Right: The documented distribution of relámpago blight as of December 2025.

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Cover photo: Area with heavy mortality of young pines that had severe feeding damage from pine reproduction weevils.