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Drought caused no permanent damage to western Montana forest, says University of Montana botanist

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DROUGHT CAUSED NO PERMANENT DAMAGE
TO WESTERN MONTANA FOREST, SAYS UM BOTANIST

MISSOULA--

No permanent damage was done to the forests of Western Montana by the drought of the past summer, according to J.R. Habeck, University of Montana botanist.

Dr. Habeck said although many plants died during the summer, their deaths will not have long range effects on forest areas.

The majority of plants which died during the dry period were those which were living outside their normal habitats. "Many Western Montana plants are opportunistic. During a period of above average rainfall, they spread themselves into habitats normally too dry for them. Then, during a drier than normal summer, they die for lack of moisture," Dr. Habeck said.

The death of the trees should not be viewed as a tragedy, according to Dr. Habeck. Their deaths are part of a survival struggle where the trees compete with grassland plants for living room. He said he had examined trees in the grassy areas north of Missoula which were over 100 years old, but had not survived the past summer.

Nor will there be any permanent damage to the animals of the forests, he said. Smaller animals such as chipmunks and gophers may have suffered and even died when the plants from which they obtain their moisture died. The animal populations are resilient, however, and their numbers will not be affected greatly, Dr. Habeck said.

"Damage suffered by larger animals will not be evident until later when the elk, deer and others switch their diets from soft bushes to the woody plants which last through the winter above the snow," he said.

The botanist said the summer's drought created a research field which should be exploited by scientists immediately because the drought conditions may not occur again for a decade or two.

Dr. Habeck plans to take some of his advanced botany students into the forests this fall to study drought effects.