

Summary of Israel's Forests: Fire, Drought, and Recovery

2025

The war in the north, the climate crisis in the south, and intense human activity in the center of the country combined to make 2025 one of the most challenging years Israel's forests have faced. Data from KKL-JNF point to significant damage, but also to a conceptual shift and the beginning of a recovery process.

The convergence of armed conflict, climatic extremes, and high levels of human activity resulted not only in extensive physical damage but also disrupted long-term ecological processes and posed an ongoing challenge to forest management in emergency conditions. Alongside widespread scorched areas, collapsing forests, and damaged natural systems, 2025 also marked the beginning of a reassessment of how forests in Israel are planned, restored, and managed, reflecting an understanding that evolving realities require adaptation rather than an automatic return to past practices.

Northern Region: Forests on the Front Line



The most severe damage was recorded in northern Israel. By the time the ceasefire came into effect at the end of November 2024, approximately 2984.8 hectares of forest land managed by KKL-JNF had burned. From a broader perspective that includes open areas not under formal management, the total burned area is estimated at approximately 25,000 hectares.

The primary areas of damage were in the Upper Galilee–Golan Heights region, where more than 2,300 hectares burned, and in the Lower Galilee, where nearly 400 hectares were affected. Beyond the destruction of vegetation, severe harm was recorded across entire wildlife systems, including the direct mortality of animals caught in the fires—among them mammals, reptiles, and insects—as well as indirect damage resulting from the loss of habitats and food sources. In addition, wet habitats were affected, including seasonal pools that dried up. One of the most serious indirect consequences of the burning of plant material, particularly in mountainous areas, was the destabilization of soil: landslides on slopes and the onset of collapse of terraces, both natural and human-made. This damage was caused by a short but highly destructive event, the scale of which far exceeds the natural ecosystem's capacity for recovery in the short term.

Alongside the fires, military maneuvers also had a significant environmental impact. The movement of IDF forces, tanks, and heavy vehicles within forest areas, the breaching of new access routes, and the deployment and encampment of troops all turned large parts of the Galilee into zones of intensive activity and caused widespread damage to scenic roads, recreational facilities, cycling trails, forest infrastructure, and parking areas.

Shimon Elgarabli, a KKL-JNF forester for the Bar'am Bloc and the Naftali Mountains, describes how, in the early stages of the war, operations were conducted under conditions of pressure and uncertainty. Damage to forests—as a result of fires and of the movement of armored vehicles and heavy equipment – was unavoidable.

According to Elgarabli, cooperation between KKL-JNF and the IDF deepened over time. “As time went on, we succeeded in establishing a joint administrative forum that convened once a month, with the aim of minimizing damage, regulating the opening of roads, and coordinating activities on the ground,” he says. For forestry professionals, this period was challenging, personally as well as professionally. Elgarabli explains that while his family was evacuated to Tiberias, he remained in the Galilee: “For three months, I opened my home to soldiers, where they slept and ate. I stayed in the field to deal with fires and to protect the forest as much as possible. Throughout the fighting, we felt a strong sense of national responsibility alongside our commitment to the forest and environment.”

As the security situation stabilized, KKL-JNF began initial restoration efforts, including the removal of safety hazards, the felling of hazardous trees, and the implementation of ecological surveys. These surveys helped distinguish between areas where nature is expected to regenerate on its own and areas that will require planting and proactive intervention.

Preliminary estimates place the extent of environmental damage in northern Israel at approximately NIS 98.5 million.

The year 2025 marked a transition from emergency management to organized rehabilitation in the forests of the north. Early in the year, KKL-JNF's efforts focused on an in-depth assessment of the scope of damage and on setting priorities for sites requiring immediate, medium-term, and long-term treatment, while drawing on policy documents and experience accumulated during past extreme events. A primary goal was to restore public forest sites to a level that ensured visitor safety. Accordingly, in February 2025, intensive work began to remove safety hazards, fell burned trees, and clear stumps. These efforts were carried out by KKL-JNF teams and contractors and were largely completed after approximately six months. At the same time, to support long-term ecological planning, surveys were conducted to identify areas of natural regeneration, which were designated as "non-intervention zones," alongside the early identification of concentrations of invasive species.

Following receipt of the survey findings, KKL-JNF implemented three parallel courses of action: continued removal of burned timber from the affected areas; the development of environmental rehabilitation plans based on ecological principles, combining supplemental planting alongside natural regeneration; and the preparation of sites and planting in accordance with the autumn and winter planting seasons.

Southern Region: The Climate Crisis Hits the Forests



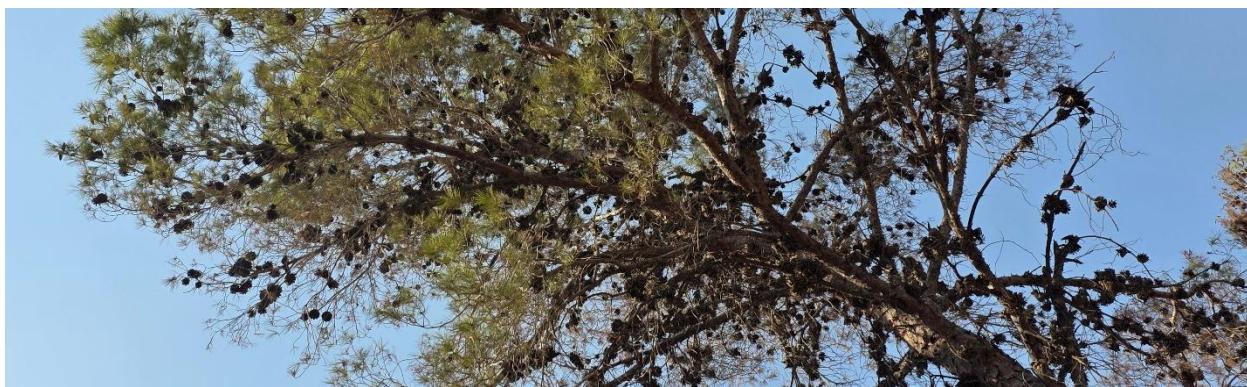
KKL-JNF's Southern Region, which covers more than 54% of the country's territory and includes approximately 53,000 hectares of planted forest, scrubland, and natural woodland, faced challenges of exceptional scale and intensity in 2025. Accelerated desertification, prolonged drought, and damage resulting from security-related activity placed forest systems under sustained stress and required a renewed focus on restoring the functional integrity of both forests and the broader ecosystem. To address a crisis of this magnitude, KKL-JNF undertook a comprehensive situation assessment. Field teams are conducting extensive documentation and mapping of the southern region, and approximately 11,500 hectares in the Southern Region have been surveyed to date. The objective is to identify and analyze areas of desiccation and mortality.

According to Gil Siaki, Director of KKL-JNF's Southern Region Forestry Division, rehabilitation efforts throughout the year were adapted to the prevailing climatic and security developments. Priority was placed on the renewal of mature forests affected by tree mortality, fires, and human-induced damage, as well as on the rehabilitation of areas damaged in recent years as a result of military activity. Emphasis was placed on encouraging natural regeneration wherever conditions allowed, alongside targeted, proactive planting in areas requiring intervention, in accordance with forest management principles adapted to southern conditions and climate change. Future planting plans, informed by experience gained in the field, will incorporate drought-resistant native species, including carob (*Ceratonia siliqua*) and Atlantic pistachio (*Pistacia atlantica*), which provide broad shade; jujube (*Ziziphus spina-christi*) and tamarisk, as well as acacia species—*Acacia negevensis* and *Acacia tortilis*—alongside selected eucalyptus species. These plantings are accompanied by the implementation of runoff-harvesting methods, designed to collect rainwater in planting pits (*limans*), as part of building a stable and resilient forest over the long term.

In 2025, KKL-JNF's Southern Division faced two major challenges that will continue to shape its work in the coming years: the rehabilitation of areas affected by war and the rehabilitation of areas affected by drought for more than a decade, the forests of the western Negev have suffered from recurrent fires resulting from hostile attacks. Proactive rehabilitation processes were begun as early as 2022, in accordance with master and statutory plans. However, following the events of October 7, 2023, and for approximately two years thereafter, the ability to carry out forest management operations across extensive areas was significantly reduced.

The resumption of activity toward the end of 2025, including the planting of the “Iron Swords Forest,” marks the renewal of rehabilitation efforts in the region. These efforts are expected to continue throughout the winter, alongside additional planting efforts and the rehabilitation of areas damaged by fires and prolonged military activity.

Central Region: Intense Civilian Activity and a Major Forest Fire



During 2025, the forests of central Israel served as an outlet for release and respite for hundreds of thousands of civilians, against the backdrop of fighting in the north and south and the need to remain close to protected areas. Residents evacuated from combat zones, together with civilians avoiding travel to the north and south, turned to the central forests as open and accessible spaces for respite and stress relief. This intense human presence had a significant impact. KKL-JNF foresters in the Central Region were required to deal with unusually high volumes of refuse, widespread vandalism, and damage to forest facilities and infrastructure, which were repaired or replaced over the course of the year. This high level of activity exacted a heavy environmental toll, and figures released here for the first time tell the full story: in 2025, approximately 4,000 tons of waste were removed from the forests of the Central Region, which represents an average increase of about 40% compared to the previous two years.

Alongside the intense human use of the forests, these areas in central Israel were subject to extreme climatic conditions. Low rainfall and irregular precipitation patterns, characterized by short periods of intense rainfall, led to the desiccation of extensive forest stands and increased the risk of forest fires, beyond the routine incidents KKL-JNF has dealt with over the years.

The peak of the crisis in the Central Region was the “Great Fire,” one of the most severe forest fires in Israel’s history. It broke out in Eshtaol Forest due to civilian negligence near Moshav Tarum and spread rapidly under conditions of extreme dryness and strong winds. The blaze consumed approximately 650 hectares in Eshtaol Forest, leapt across all six lanes of Highway 1 [the main thoroughfare between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv], and destroyed an additional 600 hectares in Ayalon-Canada Park. Overall, approximately 1,250 hectares of forest cultivated over decades were burned.

Firefighting efforts involved KKL-JNF staff and foresters from the Central Region, national firefighting and rescue forces, and foresters from other regions, who worked continuously for about 48 hours until the fire fronts were brought under control. Immediately following the event, the burned areas were closed to the public, and initial rehabilitation work began, which started with the removal of hazardous trees along forest roads and in areas posing risks to visitors.

At the same time, KKL-JNF established a professional task force in the Central Region to formulate a long-term rehabilitation plan, in accordance with forest management principles and climate change considerations. The plan includes the rehabilitation of recreation areas and forest roads, an assessment of the site’s capacity for natural regeneration, and, subsequently, the planting of tree species adapted to the region and to changing climatic conditions. The rehabilitation process is expected to continue for several years, with the goal of restoring central Israel’s forests to a functioning, safe, and resilient state, suitable for recreation and respite.

ISRAEL'S FORESTS UNDER PRESSURE: KEY STATISTICS



Photo: NotebookLM

Yaron Ohayon, Director of KKL-JNF's Land Development Administration, concludes, "2025 underscored just how integral forests are to Israel's national, environmental, and psychological resilience, and how vulnerable they also are. Simultaneously confronting war-related damage in the north, a climate crisis in the south, and exceptional strain on the forests of central Israel compels us to rethink how forests are managed. In the coming years, the emphasis will be on more diverse and resilient forests, and decision-making will be based on adapting to evolving realities rather than trying to restore the past."



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