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Despite rapid warming, seed production is not leading poleward migration in North American and European forests

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Summary (189 words)

- **To survive climate change forest trees will have to shift seed production poleward. However, warming will not stimulate tree fecundity in the north if it is limited by other habitat variables.**
- **We evaluated the responses of tree fecundity to climate change for 292 tree species in North America and Europe, using *response velocity*, defined as (climate sensitivity) × (climate change rate). The sensitivities to climate were estimated for each species and combined with rates of climate change to quantify how temperature, moisture deficits, and late freeze are influencing biogeographic shifts in tree reproduction.**
- **Results show that moisture deficit and late freeze, not annual temperature, drive changing seed production. Unlike annual temperature, which is increasing generally, change in these climate variables is not driving poleward shifts in seed production.**
- **Results do not challenge the expectation that forests might eventually shift poleward. Rather, they show why current efforts offer divergent interpretations. The changes happening now are not consistent with annual temperature trends. As warming continues, fecundity changes can best be anticipated from temperature interactions with precipitation and extremes that impact flowering and fruiting in winter and spring.**

keywords: climate change, climate velocity, drought, forest regeneration, late freeze, response velocity, seed production, tree migration

Introduction

If migration is to sustain species at risk from rapid climate change, it has to start with seed production. Climate mitigation efforts aim to facilitate the spread of populations poleward as the planet warms (Williams and Dumroese, 2013; Bower et al., 2024). Where active reforestation is feasible in the US, Canada, and Europe, it is increasingly guided by temperature-driven species projections (Linnakoski et al., 2019; Lieffers et al., 2020; MacKenzie and Mahony, 2021; USDA Forest Service, 2022; Lima et al., 2024), but field evidence does not agree on where tree migration is occurring naturally or if not, why not. The question remains: If populations lag behind rapid warming, by how much and why? The diverse effects of climate on seed production, establishment, growth, and survival (Körner and Hiltbrunner, 2018) could limit species distributions in diverse ways (Zhu et al., 2014; Qiu et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2022). Seed production is especially important because it is the first and probably limiting step for range expansion, but seed production data are too sparse and noisy to estimate trends (Clark et al., 2021). Three missing elements are needed to understand the changes that are happening now: i) estimates of seed production per forest area across landscapes and over time, ii) alternatives to time-series methods for uneven, noisy data, and iii) allowance for responses to climate variables that are changing at different rates. Here, a new data synthesis is combined with *response velocity* (Clark et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2023*b*), an alternative to current methods that integrates fecundity responses across climate gradients that change in multiple ways simultaneously. Results show how seed production is responding to climate change and why it is not explained by change in annual temperature trends.

Building the space-time evidence needed to understand biogeographic change has been frustrated by data that are difficult to translate between studies and sites. The Masting Inference and Forecasting (MASTIF) initiative provides a first synthesis of seed production per tree and per area on an annual basis (Clark et al., 2021; Journe et al., 2022; Qiu et al., 2023*a*). The MASTIF network spans species and habitats across North America and Europe (Fig. S1). The modeling approach translates individual fecundity to seed production of all trees on extensive forest inventory plots (Fig. S2) over the last 15 years.

[figure 1 here]

For population change, an approach is needed that makes use of biogeographic relationships between tree fecundity, climate, and terrain. Traditional time series methods cannot extract trends that are masked by erratic order-of-magnitude variation from one year to the next in unevenly distributed observations (Clark et al., 2021). The widely recognized "masting" phenomenon depends on poorly understood feedbacks that produce volatile annual changes (Wion et al., 2020; Shibata et al., 2020; Pesendorfer et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2023*a*) and obscure decadal trends. Even time series lasting more than a decade may include few mast events (Suzuki et al., 2005). One mast event during a study interval, versus two or three, can profoundly affect trend estimates, depending on whether events come early or late in the series. The distinction between the spatial gradient response and the time series response is demonstrated with models that decompose climate responses into norms and anomalies (Clark et al., 2014, 2021). Interannual volatility contrasts with emerging evidence for responses across gradients in climate and terrain, which can be spatially smooth (Clark et al., 2021;

Sharma et al., 2022).

An alternative to time-series analysis that is widely used to detect population range shifts is based on a species' central tendency in space, obtained by weighting the locations where it is observed by its abundance or performance. These centroids are compared for different time periods or life stages. Because they describe central tendency, geographic centroids cannot shed light on populations that move in multiple directions at the same time. For example, poleward migration would result in fecundity centroids positioned to the north of tree-abundance centroids, but the opposite is observed for most tree species in North America (Sharma et al., 2022). Centroids for recruitment rate (new recruits per area per year) have been reported south of adults, consistent with higher turnover in warmer climates, but not with poleward migration (Zhu et al., 2014). Of course, both could occur simultaneously, but climate-induced turnover, not migration, dominates the central tendency. Another study found seedling centroids positioned north of adults for northern but not southern species (Woodall et al., 2009). Comparisons of adult centroids at two time points showed idiosyncratic changes in the eastern US (Fei et al., 2017), and a shift toward warm-tolerant species in the western US (Rosenblad et al., 2023). A study of elevation change reported that centroids shift up-slope for some species and down-slope for others (Rabasa et al., 2013). Efforts to improve the resolution of population margins have expanded from centroids to higher quantiles, e.g., the latitude delimiting 95% of a population. However, quantiles are still governed by the entire population, not just its margins–expansion or contraction at a margin affects centroids and quantiles alike, regardless of whether there is movement in other margins. Quantile studies report seedling recruitment that is more consistent with contraction than poleward expansion (Nigro et al., 2025), even at cold frontiers (Zhu et al., 2012). Further north, more species than not showed evidence of a poleward shift in sapling and adult quantiles, but still find that adult quantiles are poleward of saplings (Sittaro et al., 2017). Confusingly, centroids or quantiles for demographic rates such as growth can change even when there is no change in the distribution of the species. The conflicting evidence is complicated further by the lack of habitat variables that might explain the differences.

Inconsistent evidence owes not just to methodology, but also to the nature of climate change and the many ways that climate affects recruitment. Both temperature and moisture are important for tree reproduction. Temperature affects budset, the onset and end of winter dormancy, pollinator activity (Corbet et al., 1993; Alquichire-Rojas et al., 2024), and fruit development (Stephenson, 1981). Beyond annual averages, temperature is important for its extremes and its interaction with precipitation (Thomashow, 1999; Charrier et al., 2021). The freezing temperatures that destroy fruit crops in spring represent an interaction between the timing, duration, and depth of the freeze (Brito et al., 2019; Fernandez et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2026). Moisture deficit is an interaction between precipitation and atmospheric demand–also temperature dependent. Fruit abortion is common during moisture deficits (Stephenson, 1981; Gucci et al., 2009) with documented impacts on fecundity in field studies (Clark et al., 2014; Whipple et al., 2019; Le Roncé et al., 2021). Unlike annual temperature, which is increasing in general, changes in these temperature interactions are regionally complex (fig. 1).

Response velocity is an alternative approach that exposes the pace at which climate forces fecundity change based on variation across the species range, while allowing for the effects of habitat and

individual condition (Clark et al., 2021). It expands the concept of *climate velocity* (Loarie et al., 2009; Schliep et al., 2015; Dobrowski and Parks, 2016), which combines the rate of climate change dC/dt with its spatial gradient over distance X to obtain distance per time, or "velocity": $\partial X/\partial C \times dC/dt = dX/dt$. Response velocity can be applied to any response variable; here the response is log fecundity, F. The approach substitutes a biological response to climate, $\partial F/\partial C$, for the climate gradient itself. It is the product of this climate sensitivity and climate forcing dC/dt,

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{dF}{dt} = \frac{\partial F}{\partial C}\frac{dC}{dt} &= \beta_C \frac{dC}{dt} \\ &= \text{sensitivity} \times \begin{matrix}\text{climate} \\ \text{forcing}\end{matrix}\end{aligned}$$

[Our use of the terms *sensitivity* and *forcing* are consistent with climate science, where forcing refers to change in Earth's energy balance, and sensitivity is the per-unit climate response to that forcing (e.g., Hansen et al. (2025)).] Here, forcing is climate change, and sensitivity is the per-unit fecundity response. In its simplest form, a model might be fitted as $F \propto \beta_C C$. Then β_C is the sensitivity of F to a changing climate variable C, or $\beta_C = \frac{\partial F}{\partial C}$.

Response velocity is more flexible than suggested by analogy with climate velocity, as it allows for the effects of individual condition, local habitat, and their interactions with all aspects of climate change. We include three climate variables that are changing rapidly across North America and Europe and have emerged as important influences on tree fecundity (Clark et al., 2014, 2021; Sharma et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2026), temperature T, late freeze L, and moisture deficit D (fig. 1),

$$\begin{matrix}\text{response} \\ \text{velocity}\end{matrix} = \begin{matrix}T \text{ forcing} \times \\ \text{sensitivity}\end{matrix} + \begin{matrix}L \text{ forcing} \times \\ \text{sensitivity}\end{matrix} + \begin{matrix}D \text{ forcing} \times \\ \text{sensitivity}\end{matrix}$$

(eq. (5)). The term(s) that dominate response velocity can vary between species and within species geographically due to interactions with other variables (table 1). The effect of moisture deficit depends on terrain (drainage and solar radiation), so there is a slope × aspect × moisture-deficit interaction. For example, in dry climates, fecundity may be limited by moisture or heat stress and therefore be highest on moist, N and NE aspects. In moist climates, fecundity may be limited by radiation and thus be high on S aspects. These terrain interactions differ between species (Jenkins et al., 2026).

In this study, we apply response velocity with MASTIF data to test the hypothesis that warming trends across North America and Europe (fig. 1) are driving tree fecundity poleward. Alternatively, an expected range of species' sensitivities to climate variables in Figure 1 that are not changing everywhere in the same direction could dominate and result in complex regional responses. To test this hypothesis, we model responses to climate while allowing for differences in tree size, shading from neighbors, soil pH, and terrain. Predictive distributions from the fitted model are then decomposed into the effects of each climate variable providing insight not only into rates of change but also the variables responsible for them.

Materials and Methods

The analysis quantifies seed production by individual tree-years. It translates those estimates to seed production per forest area. These area estimates, applied to forest inventories distributed across the two continents, are the basis for response velocity. The approach consists of four elements summarized in Figure 2, including data synthesis, model fitting and prediction, and evaluation of response velocities. Sections that follow summarize observations and modeling elements to supplement those in the text.

[figure 2 here]

Study regions and species

Tree fecundity is estimated from seed-trap (ST) and crop-count (CC) data collected in regions supporting woody vegetation in North America (NA) and Europe (EU). Biomes include the winter-rain shrub and woodland (Mediterranean) zones in California and southern Europe (Fig. S2). Continental interiors include temperate mixed forests, pine sandhills and savannas, and semiarid woodlands. The study extends north to boreal forests and up elevation to the montane and alpine zones of the Cascades, Sierra Nevada, Rockies, Appalachian, Pyrenees and Alps.

[figure 3 here]

The analysis includes woody plant species, both angiosperms and gymnosperms, that are abundant enough to estimate fecundity (fig. 3). This excludes Salicaceae, which are rarely recovered in seed traps and not amenable to crop counts. This includes 198 species in North America and 94 species in Europe, representing 31 families and 76 genera (Fig. S3).

MASTIF data and model

We summarize key elements from the complete description of model fitting, diagnostics, and prediction detailed in, for example, Clark et al. (2019) and Clark et al. (2021). The Masting Inference and forecasting (MASTIF) analysis differs from other compilations of tree fecundity in four ways. First, analysis is restricted to data that reference the amount of seed produced by a tree in a given year. We exclude studies based on ordinal summaries (e.g., "low", ..., "high") or seed counts per time, the latter bearing a non-linear relationship with the actual seed produced (the higher the production, the smaller the fraction observed). We do not include studies that use seed-trap counts to directly estimate seed production per area because they are dominated by a few nearby trees–they do not represent the stand.

MASTIF data include seed traps (ST) and crop counts (CC). ST data used in MASTIF come from mapped inventory plots where seed production can be modeled from tree condition and tree-to-trap distances (Clark et al., 2004; Muller-Landau et al., 2008; Moran and Clark, 2011). In the MASTIF model ST counts are conditionally Poisson depending on the production of individual trees, their collective distances from seed traps, and identification errors (Clark et al., 2019); seeds may be miss-identified or identified only to genus. The Poisson intensity for counts of seed type m in trap k is

$$\begin{pmatrix}\text{seed trap}\\ \text{count}_{mk}\end{pmatrix} \sim Poi\left(\begin{pmatrix}\text{trap}\\ \text{area}_k\end{pmatrix} \times \sum_i \left[\begin{pmatrix}\text{dispersal}\\ \text{from } i \text{ to } k\end{pmatrix} \times \begin{pmatrix}\text{species}_i\\ \text{counted as}\\ \text{type}_m\end{pmatrix} \times \begin{pmatrix}\text{true}\\ \text{crop}_i\end{pmatrix}\right]\right) \quad (1)$$

for all trees $i = 1, \ldots$ on an inventory plot. Model fitting includes a seed dispersal (re-distribution) kernel and an error matrix (probability that species i is recorded as seed type m). Crop counts (CC) of observed fruit on a tree are recorded with an estimate of the fraction of the entire crop that is observed, or crop fraction (CF). CC data are conditionally beta-binomial,

$$\begin{aligned} \underset{\text{count}_i}{\text{crop}} &\sim \int_0^1 \text{binom}\left(\begin{matrix}\text{true}\\ \text{crop}_i\end{matrix},\ \text{CF}_i\right) \times \text{beta}\left(\ \text{CF}_i\ \middle|a_i, b_i\right) d\ \text{CF}_i \\ &\sim \text{beta-binomal}\left(\begin{matrix}\text{true}\\ \text{crop}_i\end{matrix}, a_i, b_i\right) \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Parameter values $(a, b)_i$ describe a beta distribution for individual i with mean value CF_i and allow for the increasing uncertainty in CF_i as its value approaches zero (Clark et al., 2019). Through its influence on estimated latent fecundity, the spread in an individual's crop-count distribution affects its contribution to estimates of sensitivity coefficients. Although ordinal data are excluded, the model accommodates censored data, both for ST and CC counts within intervals, such as (0, 1, 2–5, 6–20, > 20) in (Bourg et al., 2013).

A second difference is the use of a hierarchical Bayes state-space model to accommodate dependence between trees, within trees over time, and between seed traps. Seed production in one year depends on previous years (e.g., the masting phenomenon). This year-to-year dependence violates the assumption of independent observations. Seed-trap counts are dependent, because traps collect seeds from many of the same trees. In the MASTIF model, tree maturation status and fecundity are latent variables that allow for these sources of dependence (Clark et al., 2019). In addition to the effects of predictors, the model includes random individual effects and year effects assigned to each eco-region, the latter approximating the regional scale where quasi-synchronous masting can emerge. CC data can be time series for trees observed repeatedly or opportunistic one-time counts. In the latter case, there is no random individual effect (the individual is observed once), and the variance between individuals is marginalized into the process error that is part of the process model (see Equation (3) below). Model fitting used the MASTIF package in R.

The third difference is that climate predictors are decomposed into spatial and temporal effects. The climate effects on individuals that experience different climate norms are confounded with climate variation over time. Decomposition into norms and anomalies (table 1) allows estimation of both effects (Clark et al., 2014, 2026).

The fourth difference is that the fitted fecundity model is combined with inventory data to estimate seed production per forest area (Clark et al., 2021; Journe et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022). The same predictors are available for fitted trees and trees on inventory plots (table 1). The predictive distribution for each tree each year on plots of known area provides the seed production per area used to evaluate response velocity. All woody plants with sufficient data coverage are included in the model (Fig. S3).

Predictors enter the model through maturation status and fecundity conditional on being reproductively mature. Both data types in Equations (1) and (2) are conditional on the "true crop", which is the seed produced by a tree in a given year. To summarize the model detailed in (Clark et al., 2019), seed

Table 1: Covariates used to fit the MASTIF model and data sources. Subscripts are tree i, site j, and year t. Norms are for the 15-year period from 2010 to 2024. Annual anomalies have the superscript a. Variable selection results in a subset of these predictors for each species. The data range and standard deviation requirements determine whether to include a predictor in the fitted model; if there is not meaningful variation, an estimate may be significant but misleading. Subsequent variable selection is by DIC (Clark et al., 2019).

Covariate	**Units**	**Data range**	**Data SD**	**Data source**
Tree diameter ($G_{ij,t}$, $G^2_{ij,t}$)	cm, cm^2	> 1 cm	3 cm	MASTIF[1]
Shade class ($B_{ij,t}$)	ordinal (class 1-5)	3 classes	2	
Moisture deficit norm (D_j)	mm	100 mm	40 mm	terraClimate[2], CHELSA[3]
Deficit anomaly ($D^a_{j,t}$)				
Temperature norm (T_j, T^2_j)	°C	5°C	3°C	
Temperature anomaly ($T^a_{j,t}$)				
Late freeze norm (L_j)	DD	20 DD	5 DD	Daymet[4], ECAD[5]
Late freeze anomaly ($L^a_{j,t}$)				
pH_j (0 - 30cm)	log concentration	1	0.2	soilgrid250m[6]
Slope (S_j)	m/m	0.05 m/m	0.03 m/m	DEM[7]
Slope × Aspect[8]	m/m			
Slope × Aspect × Deficit[9]	m/m × mm			
Topographic position (P_j)	m	40 m	4 m	
Ecoregion (for year effects)	categorical			World Wildlife Fund[10]

[1] Clark et al. (2021); [2] Abatzoglou et al. (2018); [3] Karger et al. (2017); [4] Thornton et al. (2022); [5] Cornes et al. (2019); [6] ISRIC (2024); [7] Gesch et al. (2002); [8] two terms: $S_j(\sin A_j, \cos A_j)$ for slope S and aspect A in radians; [9] two more terms: $D_j S_j(\sin A_j, \cos A_j)$;
[10] Year effects are grouped by ecoregion Olson et al. (2001)

production f occurs for a tree that is reproductively mature, $m = 1$, as $[f, m = 1] = [f|m = 1][m = 1]$, where mature status is a probit function of tree diameter (Clark et al., 2019). Fitted coefficients include main effects of predictors (including norms and anomalies for MDEF and LFDD), interactions, and year effects. The conditional fecundity model for tree i at location j (within eco-region r) in year t is

$$\log f_{ij[r],t} = \mathbf{x}'_{ij,t}\boldsymbol{\beta} + \gamma_{r,t} + \alpha_i + \epsilon_{ij,t} \tag{3}$$

where $\mathbf{x}_{ij,t}$ is the design vector holding main effects and interactions, $\boldsymbol{\beta}$ is the corresponding vector of fitted coefficients, $\gamma_{r,t}$ is the year effect for ecoregion r, α_i is the random effect, and $\epsilon_{ij,t}$ is random error. The year effect takes up synchronous variation between trees of an ecoregion that are not explained by interannual climate anomalies.

Predictors in the model are broadly consistent with the masting literature that has focused on winter/spring conditions and growing season moisture, while at the same time minimizing model size. Climate variables are defined for months that are important for reproduction in a given year. Annual temperature is included in the model because it is central to the literature on tree migration and because all months can contribute to seed production, albeit in different ways (Körner and Hiltbrunner, 2018). We include months from the previous and current years through the time of fruiting. We allow for a quadratic response (hump-shaped) response. Late-freeze degree days (LFDD) summarize risks at the time of flowering and fruiting, when development is especially vulnerable to low temperatures. For late freeze, chilling days accumulate from December of the previous year until the chilling delay is satisfied, followed by LFDD accumulation until freezing temperatures no longer occur (Clark et al., 2026) (see Supplement). Growing season moisture deficits threaten seed crops to the extent that fruit abortion is common in dry years (Stephenson, 1981; Charrier et al., 2021). Although effects can be acute in summer, soil moisture levels integrate variation in precipitation from the previous year. We include the accumulated difference between monthly PET and P from the previous and the current year until seeds are developed. This current year contribution runs through May for spring-dispersed seed (*Acer, Ulmus*) and through August for all others. Our deficit variable allows for moisture excess, in the sense that PET - P can be negative when P exceeds PET. Climate variables are included as the local site norm and the site anomalies (Clark et al., 2013).

In addition to climate, predictors include individual attributes (diameter and shade class– see **Supplement: Shade class**), soil pH, and terrain (slope, aspect, topographic position). These shape variables are used instead of solar irradiance, because the latter does not integrate how terrain can affect drainage, heat load, and insolation. We include the interaction between terrain and moisture deficit because moisture and insolation effects can be amplified by climate (Jenkins et al., 2026).

Climate sensitivity estimates ($\hat{\beta}_T, \ldots$) in Equation (5) are available for variables that are retained following variable selection, as detailed in Clark et al. (2019). Because species differ in geographic ranges and sampling, initial screening restricts the model (terms in Table 1) to those with sufficient absolute range and standard deviation, shown in Table 1), and with variance inflation factors less than 10. The selected model for each species has the lowest DIC. Model diagnostics are included for all fitted models and Bayesian standard errors in Supplemental files.

Continental prediction

Predictive distributions of seed mass follow methods of Clark et al. (2021) (see also Sharma et al. (2022); Qiu et al. (2021); Journe et al. (2022)). Combining the production of all trees on a plot yields fecundity per area per year for $> 10^5$ plots in NA and EU (Supplement). In NA, inventory plots include USDA's Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) program, NEON, and Canada's National Forest Inventory (NFI). In EU, inventory plots come from country-based national inventories (Baranger et al., 2025). On both continents national inventories are supplemented with fixed-area and variable-radius plots in the MASTIF study (Supplement). Plots vary in size and in the minimal diameter used to include trees. We exclude trees below 12 cm in diameter to make plots comparable. Few trees below this size threshold are reproductive, so the effect of this threshold is small. Species-level parameter estimates are available for 87% of trees that occur on inventory plots, the remainder summarized by genus-level estimates (Supplement).

Response velocity and trends

The terms in response velocity that change or interact with variables that change are temperature T (°C), late-freeze degree days L (degree days), and moisture deficit D (mm/month),

$$E(F) = \overbrace{\beta_T T + \beta_{T^2} T^2}^{\text{temperature}} + \overbrace{\beta_L L}^{\text{late freeze}} + \underbrace{\left(\beta_D + \beta_{A_1 D} A_1 + \beta_{A_2 D} A_2\right) D}_{\text{moisture deficit} \times \text{terrain}} + \ldots \tag{4}$$

for slope S (m/m), and aspect variables $(A_1, A_2) = S(\sin A, \cos A)$ for aspect A (radians) (Clark, 1990). Ellipses in eq. (4) represent terms in the model that do not interact with changing T, L, or D, including model error. The response velocity is the time derivative of eq. (4),

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{d}{dt}E(F) = & \overbrace{\frac{\partial F}{\partial T}\frac{dT}{dt}}^{\text{temperature}} + \overbrace{\frac{\partial F}{\partial L}\frac{dL}{dt}}^{\text{late freeze}} + \overbrace{\underbrace{\frac{\partial F}{\partial D}\frac{dD}{dt}}_{\text{main effect}} + \underbrace{\frac{\partial F}{\partial (SAD)}(A_1 + A_2)\frac{dD}{dt}}_{\text{terrain interaction}}}^{\text{moisture deficit}} \\ = & (\beta_T + 2\beta_{T^2} T)\frac{dT}{dt} + \beta_L \frac{dL}{dt} + (\beta_D + \beta_{A_1 D} A_1 + \beta_{A_2 D} A_2)\frac{dD}{dt} \end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

The second line in eq. (5) substitutes fitted sensitivity coefficients ($\beta_T, \ldots$) for derivatives in the first line. The terms include quadratic temperature effects followed by the main effect of moisture deficit and its interaction with slope:aspect $S(A_1, A_2)$. Thus, although slope and aspect are static, they modulate the response to changing moisture deficit.

As in climate science, fecundity trends are taken as the slope of the time series (e.g., Hansen et al. (2025)). For each species and inventory plot sj, the slope is $cov(\mathbf{F}_{sj}, \mathbf{Y})/var(\mathbf{Y})$, for log fecundity

and year vectors for the 15-yr period from 2010 to 2024. This time interval was selected because it is most recent, sufficiently long to capture trends, and in alignment with most of the fecundity data. This interval is broadly consistent with longer-term trends. One departure is the late-19th century "warming hole" in the southeastern US, which has since disappeared (Meehl et al., 2015), hence the positive trend since 2010 (fig. 1). To evaluate response velocity, the terms of Equation (5) were assembled from sensitivity coefficients ($\beta_T, \dots$) and rates of climate change ($dT/dt, \dots$) (trends in Figure 1). The contributions of terms to response velocity were taken as the fraction of variance they represent in Equation (5).

[figure 4 here]

Results

Seed production is not associated with trends in temperature, but rather with climate variables that changed in different directions. Since 2010, temperatures increased slower in North America than in Europe, which were highest in southern Iberia and the east (fig. 1). In contrast to pervasive warming, change in late freeze and moisture was heterogeneous. Late freeze norms are higher in southern and western North America than in Europe; however, late freeze increased in southern and eastern North America and central and eastern Europe, but decreased elsewhere (Clark et al., 2026). In North America, moisture deficits increased in the West and decreased in the East. The western Mediterranean and eastern Europe dried rapidly, while northwestern Europe and northern Italy saw increasing moisture surpluses.

[figure 5 here]

Trends and response velocities

Response velocities for 292 species in North America (Table S2) and Europe (Table S3) combine sensitivities and rates of change in climate (see **Materials and Methods**). Fit diagnostics and parameter estimates are available in the supporting files (datasetS1.csv, datasetS2.csv, datasetS3.csv) with metadata in Tables S4, and S5. Trend analysis and response velocity represent different variables (change over time versus climate sensitivity $\times$ climate change), yet their ranges of variation are similar (lower panels in fig. 4), albeit with more extreme values in North America. Again, both have the same dimensions: log fecundity per area per year. Trend estimates are degraded by volatile seed production between years, whereas response velocity integrates variation across the range. The distributions for both quantities are concentrated within the interval $(-0.1, 0.1)$, or $\pm 10\%$ fecundity change per year. The zero-centered distributions indicate approximate balance for increase and decrease; 94% and 96% of species include zero within their 95% distribution across North America and Europe, respectively (Fig. S4, S5).

When averaged separately for species that increase or decrease, North American trends and velocities were highest in the Southeast and Upper Midwest (fig. 4). To generate these maps, we determined the overall trend and response velocity by species (Fig. S4, S5) and divided them into

"increasers" or "decreasers". In Europe, the highest fecundity trends and velocities occurred in SW Iberia.

In neither continent are aggregate trends precisely associated with any one climate variable in Figure 1. However, regions of high response velocity overlap with rapid change in moisture deficit and late freeze. Despite general agreement when averaged across all species, aggregated values in Figure 4 mask high variation between species.

Sensitivity to climate

Habitat variation is one of two components that contribute to Figure 5a, the other being sensitivity. Species sensitivity coefficients, the derivatives in eq. (5), are detailed in Supplement files and summarized in Figure 5b. For all three climate variables, the ranges of sensitivity coefficients are similar between continents. These sensitivities cannot be compared between variables because they have different units. However, responses to each variable can be compared between continents (they are unstandardized). Positive and negative values are estimated for moisture deficit and late freeze, depending on species. A hump-shaped temperature response has positive linear (β_T) and negative quadratic (β_{T^2}) coefficients. Sixty five percent and 76% of species in North America and Europe, respectively, include a non-zero quadratic term (gray bars for $\beta_{T^2} < 0$ in the accepted model), but this does not ensure that a temperature optimum exists within the species range. Although few species show temperature sensitivity on both continents, sensitivity to moisture deficit is more pervasive in North America.

The sensitivity coefficients of Figure 5b combine with the variation in predictors to determine response velocity (eq. (5)). Temperature change is weakly associated with tree fecundity, which aligns instead with moisture deficit and late freeze (fig. 5a). Terrain modulates moisture stress (orange portion of brown deficit bars), but its importance varies between species. For many species, omission of terrain would miss the effects of moisture deficit on fecundity. Late freeze (blue) follows in importance the moisture deficit, while temperature (black) plays a minor role. The connection to response velocity follows with an example.

Quercus alba (white oak), widespread in eastern North America (fig. 3), shows the "hump-shaped" temperature response commonly assumed in species distribution and demographic models (brown in Figure 6a). This response is evident along the geographic transect of maximum temperature change (inset map). Temperature declines 10°C from southwest to northeast (black line in Figure 6a). The effect of temperature on fecundity (brown in Figure 6a) has its maximum near latitude 38°N. Temperature has increased fastest in the deep South and between 39°N and 43°N (black line in Figure 6b). Because temperature increases across the entire transect, its effect is positive north of this maximum and negative south (brown in Figure 6b). Again, this is the response shape that should drive poleward migration. In this analysis, many species do not respond in this expected way, in part because the evidence for a hump is absent, but more importantly, temperature effects are overwhelmed by moisture deficit and late freeze.

Despite the hump-shaped temperature response in *Q. alba*, seed production is not shifting poleward because annual temperature is not the dominant contributor to fecundity change. Figure 6d shows the

full response decomposed by the three terms in Equation (5). All three climate variables have changed substantially since 2010 (fig. 6c), but *Q. alba*'s high sensitivity to moisture deficit made this variable most consequential. Moisture deficit has been declining in the Southeast (negative values in Figure 6c), associated with fecundity increases that do not occur in the northern part of its range. The trend toward increased moisture combined with high sensitivity accounts for its dominating influence on response velocity in Figure 6d. Other terms are minor, including the terrain interactions with moisture deficit (orange in Figure 6d). Although not important for *Q. alba*, terrain interactions are common on both continents (fig. 5a). Rather than poleward increases in fecundity, the mapped response in Figure 6 increases in the south (black) and decreases in much of the north (red). Taken across all species there is no tendency for species velocities to increase poleward, because, as for *Quercus alba*, temperature effects are dominated by other climate variables fig. 5.

[figure 6 here]

Although median trends and response velocities show no phylogenetic signal when combined with other ecological traits, their variability (standard deviations) emerge as significant for one of five indices, Pagel's λ (Table S1). In the barplots sorted by phylogeny in Figure 7 variation is low for response velocity with the exception of a few species in *Pinus*, *Quercus*, *Acer*, and Rosaceae, all from North America. These high values account for the extremes summarized in Figure 4. Of course, the capacity to identify phylogenetic signal depend on the distribution of data, which could change as data continue to accumulate.

Discussion

The poleward shift in fecundity that is expected from rising temperatures is not observed in North America and Europe because seed production is primarily associated with moisture and spring conditions, neither of which generates poleward forcing. Unlike mean annual temperature, which is increasing across both continents, moisture deficits and late freeze show regional increases and decreases (fig. 1). The locations of rapid fecundity change do not align with rapid temperature increase, because the temperature influence is weak (fig. 5). The heterogeneous forcing by moisture deficit and late freeze is consistent with the ambiguous movement of centroids in eastern North America (Fei et al., 2017), as is the association between aridity and recruitment/adult centroids in western North America (Rosenblad et al., 2023; Nigro et al., 2025). Large changes in southern Iberia (fig. 4) are associated with declines in moisture that align with orchard losses in North America and Europe (Clark et al., 2026).

[figure 7 here]

As with any effort to tie demographic variation to environment, the legacy of past extremes that deteriorates individual condition will be hard to extract from observational data (Pederson et al., 2014; Losso et al., 2022). Efforts have been made to correlate demographic rates with hundreds of lagged interactions in climate data without yielding general relationships. In the species *Homo sapiens*, where clinical and epidemiological data are comparatively enormous, long-term health outcomes remain an area of active research. Just as tree mortality often follows decades of morbidity (Wyckoff and Clark,

2002), we expect that fecundity will likewise reflect past events that will be hard to isolate. Our focus on associations with recent climate variation (current and previous year) attempts to capture effects that might be most consequential.

This study does not find an overall decline in tree fecundity on either continent. For more than 90% of species, the locations where fecundity is declining are offset to varying degrees by increases in other regions. Zero-centered distributions of fecundity change (Fig. S4, S5) would be expected if, for example, a poleward shift results in increases at high latitudes balanced by declines at low latitudes. This is the conditional effect of temperature on fecundity shown in Figure 6a. However, current (and future) habitat availability does not span the full range of climates and terrain that a species might occupy, an issue discussed by Feeley and Silman (2010). For example, the southern ranges of many species are truncated by water bodies (Gulf of Mexico and Mediterranean Sea). East-west trending Mediterranean climates that penetrate to Asia define southern limits for many of the mixed forest species of central Europe where conditions are not only warm, but also shift to winter rain. This seasonality shift does not influence southern range limits in eastern North America, which instead trend toward high temperatures and high year-round precipitation before truncation by the Gulf of Mexico. For this reason, southern boundaries for many species cannot be defined solely by temperatures. Potential habitat extends beyond what is offered by geographic constraints and climate/terrain interactions. Although the biogeography of the change in fecundity is not consistent with poleward migration, the apparent balance between increases and decreases is influenced by potential habitat.

As with any observational study, results depend on the distribution of data. The history of observations across two continents that combines opportunistic sampling and long-term inventories offers insights that depend on where species can be observed. Coverage differs for each species (Fig. S1), not only due to geographic constraints on species distributions, but also the feasibility of data collection. The estimates offered here will continue to improve as data accumulate.

This analysis does not find clear associations between response velocity and traits that are routinely measured in ecological studies (fig. 3). The fact that seed size and dispersal vector (animals versus wind) are not closely aligned with response velocities (Table S1) is not unexpected, because dispersal affects fitness whether or not climate is changing, and response velocity is specific to the combination of climate variables that are changing at a time and place. Species represent many combinations of traits that affect the two elements of tree migration, seed dispersal, which influences movement, and response velocity, which affects how fecundity responds to climate change. Species that contrast in traits associated with dispersal (fig. 8) can have response velocities that average near zero across the map. Most of the abundant small, winged samaras of *Liriodendron tulipifera* (fig. 3b) move outside the canopy area of parents (beyond 10 m); they can travel long distances. Unlike most Fagaceae, *Carya* lacks known long-distance dispersers, the woody shell being apparent primarily to rodents (beneath the outer leathery pericarp in fig. 3b). Without animal dispersal, *Carya alba* has limited migration potential, which could be problematic under rapid climate change. These species with similar ranges of response velocities, are expected to differ in migration potential due to dispersal differences. It should be noted, however, that both genera disappeared from western Europe when advancing glaciers

required spread across challenging terrain that barred entry to southern Europe (Orain et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2019).

The potential for greater uncertainty in North-American redistribution is raised by the more extreme response velocities and trends in North America compared to Europe (fig. 4). These extremes might be due to high sensitivities of North American species (fig. 5b) and especially rapid change in North American moisture deficits and late freeze (fig. 1). It is also possible that more intensive management in Europe has degraded relationships between climate and species responses to a greater degree than in North America.

Results do not challenge the expectation that forests will at some point shift poleward. Rather, they show that the changes in fecundity happening now are not consistent with annual temperature trends. As warming continues, temperature effects can continue to operate through interactions with precipitation (moisture deficit) and include extremes that impact winter/spring flowering/fruiting phenology (late freeze). These indirect pathways could continue to complicate the rates and directions of population shifts. The weak responses to annual temperature trends indicate that seed production is not necessarily low at poleward population frontiers. Hump-shaped (convex) temperature response is not pervasive in the regions analyzed here. Several studies that could not be included in MASTIF (they do not reference seeds per tree) show strong seed production near poleward range limits in Quebec (Drobyshev et al., 2014; Solarik et al., 2020; Maleki et al., 2024), supporting the interpretation that temperature is not the dominant limitation on fecundity for most species.

Response velocity offers an alternative to traditional time-series methods when trends are buried in noise. The questions are not limited to mast production in trees (see also Clark et al. (2021)). Response velocity also exposed the impact of habitat change on ground beetle abundances generated by noisy pitfall trap data (Qiu et al., 2023*b*). In such cases, the trend at a specific location is less important than the implications of change for species that vary in their climate sensitivities over regions. The time required for a local trend to emerge from noisy data may lag the indicators that can be extracted from response velocity.

Efforts to anticipate changes in foodwebs require understanding of bottom-up controls supported by fruit, seed, and nut production of trees (Rosenblatt and Schmitz, 2016). If mobile consumers such as insects, birds, and mammals outrun their resource base, then climate-change risk assessment has to consider not only trends in mean annual temperature, but also its interactions with moisture and late freeze. Results here provide the estimates of food production per area available now and how it is changing. The disproportionate production of seeds, fruits, and nuts (Journe et al., 2022) and high density of frugivores (Terborgh, 1986; Schemske et al., 2009; Hargreaves et al., 2019) in the wet tropics both suggest impacts that could come through changes in bottom-up control.

For forest managers, results highlight the need to evaluate species responses to the multiple ways climate is changing, including interactions with terrain. In addition, to the mast production estimates needed by wildlife managers (MCSHEA et al., 2007), response velocity offers conservation and reforestation efforts that are currently guided by temperature-driven models Gardner and Bullock (2025)) with the sensitivity that directly guides responses. These results have direct application to species-selection decisions that can be tailored to climate change and its interaction with local habitats.

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Data availability: Code is available in R package MASTIF on CRAN. Data are deposited at the Duke Digital Repository `https://research.repository.duke.edu/record/433?ln=en&v=tab`.

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Supplementary files

- The **Supplement file** includes text that expands on the distribution of observations (Fig. S1), shade classes, late-freeze degree days, the prediction grid (Fig S2), species coverage (Fig. S3), phylogenetic signal (Table S1), response-velocity summaries (Figures S4, S5, Tables S2, S3)) and metadata for excel spreadsheets (Tables S4, S5):

  Figure S1. **Mapped distribution of observations** in MASTIF.

  Figure S2. **Mapped prediction grid** including aggregated ecoregions.

  Figure S3. **Phylogram of study species** by genus and family.

  Figure S4. **Response velocity for each species** in North America.

  Figure S5. **Response velocity for each species** in Europe.

  Table S1. Phylogenetic signal for species traits.

  Table S2. **Species on North American inventory plots**.

  Table S3. **Species on European inventory plots**.

  Table S4. File `datasetS1.csv` metadata.

  Table S5. Files `datasetS2.csv` and `datasetS3.csv` metadata.

- `datasetS1.csv` has rows for each model fit organized by genus and region and then by lowest `DICweighted`.

- `datasetS2.csv` and `datasetS3.csv` include posterior mean estimates and standard errors, respectively.

Figure legends

Figure 1: **Climate norms and trends that affect tree fecundity** for 15 years (2010 to 2024). Temperature (top) is trending upward (°C yr^{-1}) across both continents. Trends in late freeze degree days (LFDD) and moisture deficit D (mm) are regional, including both increases and decreases. LFDD is shown for a chilling delay of $CD = 30$ degree days (see text). Trends are the forcing terms $\frac{dT}{dt}$, $\frac{dL}{dt}$, and $\frac{dD}{dt}$ in Equation (5).

Figure 2: **The analysis** consists of data collections (A), model fitting (B) and generation of predictive distributions for forest inventory plots (C), and evaluation of response velocities (D).

Figure 3: **Capacity to move with climate change depends not only on dispersal, but also fecundity.** Response velocity quantifies how the pace of climate change influences fecundity change, which need not associate with traits that influence dispersal, including movement by scatter-hoarding rodents (a), a wide range of vertebrate consumers (b), and wind (c).

Figure 4: **Trends and response velocities**, shown separately as averages for species that had increasing fecundity (blue maps) and decreasing (red maps). Trends and velocities are aggregated over species at bottom. The similarities between trend and velocity in these aggregate maps disappears at the species level due to high noise in time-series data used to estimate trends (Fig. S4, S5).

Figure 5: **Variance contributed to response velocity and sensitivity coefficients**. **a)** Forcing (contribution to response velocity) is dominated by moisture deficit (brown) followed by late freeze (blue) (the moisture deficit scale is truncated at (-0.1,.1); otherwise, interior values would not be visible due to high values at the extremes). Each vertical line is one species ordered by response to moisture deficit and then late freeze. The moisture-deficit interaction with terrain (slope:aspect) is shown in orange. *Quercus alba*, labeled at left is expanded in Figure 6. **b)** Coefficients from eq. (5) are species' sensitivities to climate variables, in this case ordered by moisture deficit. Coefficients have similar magnitudes on the two continents, but overall more extreme values in North America. The full table of coefficients and standard errors is included in Supplement files.

Figure 6: **Climate contributions** for *Quercus alba* along the axis of maximum temperature (T) change (map) show increases in the South (black) and decreases in the North (red). **a)** T declines with latitude (black) while its contribution to response velocity increases and then declines (brown). [Terms from eq. (5)] **b)** T increased at different rates on the transect (black line). Poleward forcing (brown line) comes from a negative contribution South (below the optimum) and positive North. **c)** Rates of change corresponding to factors in Equation (5). **d)** Response velocity (shaded grey) is the sum of four terms in Equation (5); moisture deficit (D) dominates. Its interaction with slope:aspect is negligible as are T and L.

Figure 7: **Standard deviations for trends and response velocities** [SD(TR), SD(RV), respectively] show weak relationships to phylogeny (Table S1) With the exceptions of some high values for species in *Quercus* and *Pinus*, variation in RV is much lower than in trends. Colors highlight family differences.

Figure 8: **The fraction of seed dispersed more than 10 m** in the absence of animal vectors for two species in North America (fig. 3). Dispersal estimates come from the fitted dispersal kernel (Clark et al., 2019). Wind-dispersed *Liriodendron tulipifera* sends most seeds beyond 10 m, indicated by the dispersed map (center) that is much like the total (left) and as a log ratio of dispersed/total seed that is close to zero (dispersed = total, right). Large-seeded *Carya* sends a small fraction beyond 10 m.