

# Disease has Christmas-tree growers worried

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SANTA CRUZ — Area Christmas-tree growers aren't ho-ho-hoing about a once-mysterious disease that is affecting hundreds of Monterey pine trees.

So far, the so-called pitch canker disease has not spread to local Christmas-tree farms during their busiest season. However, county agricultural officials are already talking about a future quarantine should the disease spread. Such a quarantine could prohibit Monterey pines from being transported out of the area unless inspected and certified first.

Monterey pines are the second most prevalent tree grown in the county. Redwoods are first. The pines are commonly grown at local tree farms and at nurseries, not to mention alongside freeways and in individual yards.

So far, the disease has been found in a 23-square-mile area — from Natural Bridges State Beach on Santa Cruz' west side to State Park Drive in Aptos.

Among the most visible of the infected trees are those along highways 1 and 17, and near New Brighton State Beach in Capitola. Dead, brown branches are numerous.

Dr. Art McCain, a plant pathologist from UC Berkeley, said

the potential threat from the disease is of "large magnitude," adding, "I don't think we can eradicate it."

The only known method of control elsewhere involves cutting off infected branches.

Rick Bergman, assistant agricultural commissioner for Santa Cruz County, said Thursday it is too early to start recommending methods of control. He also said any possible quarantine would certainly not be in effect this holiday season.

Any quarantine also would not prohibit taking Monterey pines out of the county. Instead, it would require the Agricultural Commissioner's Office to inspect and certify the pines

before being shipped. It would affect both Christmas tree farms and wholesale nurseries.

The local infestation marks the first time the pitch canker disease has been discovered in California. The disease is common in the Southeast. Monterey pines in Hayward and possibly San Mateo County are also showing symptoms.

The dollar value of Christmas tree farms in California was more than \$30 million in 1985, with 52 of the state's 58 counties having commercial tree farms. In Santa Cruz County, tree farms were worth \$280,000 last year, ranked 15th in the state.

Ornamental nursery stock — of

which Monterey pines are part — was an \$8.6-million industry in the county last year. That ranked as the fifth most-valuable crop.

"Sure, it concerns us," said Paul Giles, co-owner of Station Ranch on Mountain Charlie Road. "We've been keeping track of the disease."

Giles added that any future quarantine would hurt business.

"That would hit us hard," he said. "We get so many customers from Santa Clara County and throughout the San Francisco Bay Area."

The disease was discovered locally in July after a Santa Cruz tree surgeon reported dozens of trees dying. David McBay, owner of

Pleasant Valley Tree Service, believed the trees were being attacked by insects known as engraver beetles. Subsequent investigation by Cooperative Extension scientists, however, revealed the pitch canker.

Besides Monterey pines, Bishop and Aleppo pines have been found to be susceptible. Affected trees have yellow branch tips that turn a reddish-brown before dying. There also is a bleeding, resinous canker on the trunk or branches.

The disease itself usually does not kill trees. Instead, it leaves them weakened and easy prey to other diseases or infestations from insects.