

FREEES Diseased trees lining highway face ax

3-3-87
By KEITH MURAOKA

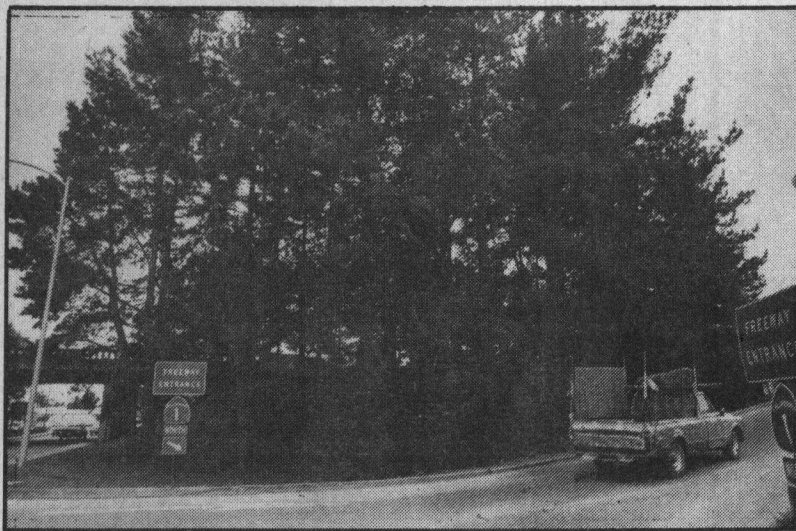
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Approximately 900-1,200 diseased Monterey pine trees along Highway 1 from Santa Cruz to Aptos are earmarked to be felled by the state Department of Transportation.

The 1,200 figure is four times more than originally expected as pitch canker disease, which affects pines, continues its spread since being detected in Santa Cruz last summer. Updated estimates place the number of infected trees in Santa Cruz County between 2,000 and 3,000. Many, if not all, could die if nothing is done.

Pitch canker-infected trees are easily distinguished by entire needle branches that turn brown and die. Monterey pines — second in number locally only to redwoods — are the most common victim of the fungus disease, although Bishop and Aleppo pines are also known to be vulnerable.

Caltrans spokeswoman Cheryl Montana could not confirm Monday afternoon that such a decision had been made. However, two local sources corroborated that Caltrans



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Infected trees have been marked for cutting.

has gone out to bid on the removal of the towering pine trees along Highway 1.

According to Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commissioner Lenord Craft and California Department of Forestry Forester David Soho, Caltrans officials have decided that Monterey pine trees that are 25 per-

cent or more infected with the disease will be cut down.

Caltrans officials have told them that a 60-day bid process has begun on the massive undertaking. Neither knew when the bid process would end or when actual tree-cutting would begin.

Montana said Caltrans typically

sets a 60-day bid process, at which time, the lowest bidder would be awarded the job. Any tree removal would be accompanied by a re-planting program.

Many of the infected trees are located at the fishhook — where Highways 1 and 17 meet, as well as near New Brighton Beach in Capitola. The huge evergreens provide a sound barrier to homes adjacent Highway 1.

Trees to be cut down have been painted with white X's on their trunks. Other trees have white patches of paint on their needles.

Pitch canker disease was detected in Santa Cruz last July. It has since spread to a wide area from Natural Bridges State Beach on Santa Cruz' west side to Pinto Lake County Park in Watsonville.

There is no treatment other than cutting down infected trees before the disease spreads. Experimental treatments using injections have met with mixed success, said Soho.

Last December, Marty Cookman, landscape supervisor of Santa Cruz County for Caltrans, said there was

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"basic agreement" to cut down some 300 trees. Since then, the figure has quadrupled.

Soho said Department of Forestry crews have estimated that 2,000-3,000 pines in the county are infected. He called the area from Natural Bridges State Beach on Santa Cruz' westside to the Seacliff exit of Highway 1 a "hot spot." However, infected trees have been found "from the ocean to five miles up Old San Jose Road in Soquel," he added.

Soho said Caltrans has had to work faster on the problem than forestry or agriculture officials since many of the infected pines are along Highway 1 and could present safety haz-

ards to motorists. Diseased, weakened trees are more likely to blow over in storms.

Soho added that the county is lucky that, so far, the disease has not spread to Ponderosa pines, which are grown for timber-cutting.

Up to now, pitch canker has only been found in the southeastern United States and other parts of the world. In the Southeast, it is a serious forest disease affecting thousands of acres of pines.

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