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Report on trees delayed

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SANTA CRUZ — County supervisors want a lot more information on the pitch canker disease sweeping through area Monterey pines before the state follows through on a plan to fell some 1,200 of them along Highway 1.

Supervisors Tuesday postponed for three weeks a scheduled report on the fungus from county Agricultural Commissioner Lenord Craft. Craft requested the postponement since a draft report of the local problem conducted by a steering committee of scientists and state officials has not been submitted to the state.

Supervisors used the delay to ask that numerous questions be answered — including more on whether a controversial chemical injection treatment process could save the dying trees.

The pitch canker fungus reportedly has spread to 2,000 to 3,000 pines in the county. The hot spot remains the Highway 1 corridor between Highway 17 and Aptos.

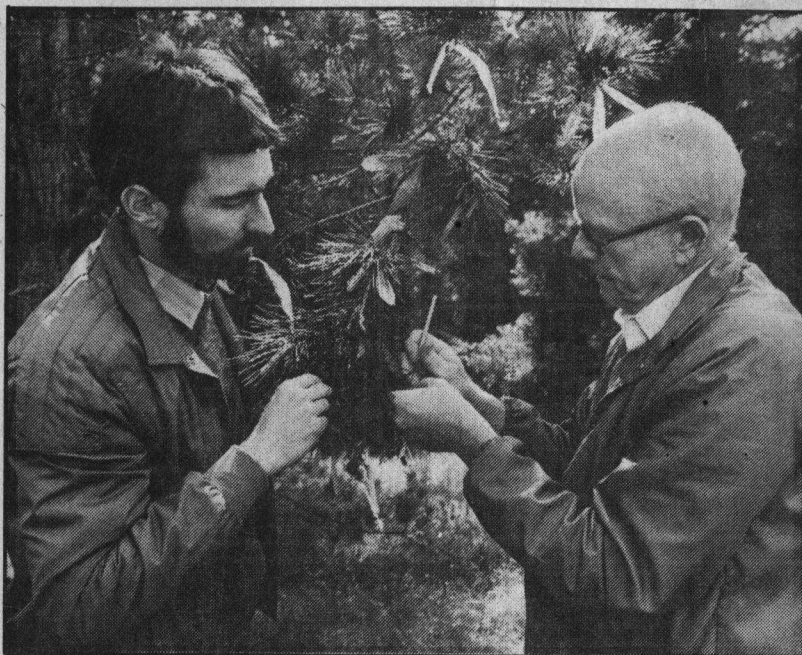
Caltrans officials have said up to 1,200 of the diseased pines, some 60-foot-high, could be cut down in as little as three months. Caltrans and state officials have dismissed claims of the injection treatment process, saying it is unproven.

Despite the skepticism by state officials, however, local University of California Cooperative Extension Farm Adviser Steve Tjosvold and Art McCain, a Berkeley plant pathologist with the Extension Department, were in Santa Cruz Tuesday laying the groundwork for experiments using the injection treatment.

McCain recently called William Thomas — a forest pathologist from Lafayette who developed the injection treatment — a “quack.” Yet, he is moving forward on experiments with it.

Tjosvold said plans call for treating five diseased pines in the New Brighton State Beach area with the Fungisol injections. Those injections are expected to occur in two or three weeks.

Tuesday, the two took samples from suspected diseased pines to determine whether they truly have the pitch canker fungus.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Steve Tjosvold, left, and Art McCain examine diseased trees.

“We’re doing the experiments because all the techniques should be looked at scientifically to decide whether something will work or not,” said Tjosvold.

County Supervisor Gary Patton listed the injection treatment as just one of many issues that need to be answered. Others included whether a replacement program for any trees that are cut down could be ordered by the county and the question of removal of diseased trees on private property.

At this point, Caltrans has no plant to replant. Jim Claypool, Caltrans maintenance engineer in San Francisco, called it “a question of priorities,” saying the department wants to stop the disease first and foremost.

Others have complained that Caltrans’ cutting of diseased trees will do nothing to prevent the spread on private property or property other than that owned by the state. Caltrans is moving forward more quickly on a plan since the diseased

trees present a safety hazard to motorists.

“If we’re talking epidemic, we have to treat all the trees the same,” said Patton. “If a diseased tree is on private property, it too, has to be dealt with.”

Both Patton and Supervisor Joe Cucchiara expressed the need for a replanting program should the highway trees be felled.

Cucchiara said state law requires replanting since the trees were originally planted to buffer noise and screen Highway 1 when it was built.

As a member of the county Transportation Commission, Cucchiara was successful in getting the commission to send a letter to Caltrans objecting to cutting trees without an approved replanting plan.

Other issues to be answered on April 7 when the item returns include wood-disposal, the coastal permit process, state financing and which state agency should be the lead agency in any treatment or eradication plan.