

Tree-disease picture bleak

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SANTA CRUZ — The cutting of 527 pitch canker-diseased Monterey pine trees along local highways will help against the spread of the disease, but is not a solution.

So say several pathology and entomology experts, who have been called in by the state to review the local situation.

In fact, one of those experts — Art McCain, a Berkeley plant pathologist with the California Cooperative Extension Service and a member of the state's pitch canker technical review committee — has gone so far as to predict, "The (on-going) cutting is, in my opinion, too little, too late."

"There's going to be additional (tree) losses in your (Santa Cruz) area," he maintained.

W.D. Thomas, a consulting forest pathologist from Martinez, agreed, saying the current cutting of 527 trees along highways 1 and 17 by the

state Department of Transportation is "the right first step."

"They're doing the right thing now, but there are a lot of problems ahead," he added.

What's worrying the experts is the area's recent spring-like weather. Or, more precisely, how the warmer weather is encouraging once-dormant insects inside the infected trees to emerge, even as Caltrans crews cut the trees down.

Joe Fox, a post-graduate entomology researcher for the University of California — who is aiding Caltrans on the tree-cutting — confirmed that there are beetles and other insects "flying around."

While Fox said those insects "don't necessarily spread the (pitch canker) disease," both McCain and Thomas conceded it's possible the insects will do precisely that.

"The insects, such as bark beetles, are moving, so you do have a hazard," said Thomas. "The problem is not going to be solved in one year. The warm weather is opening the way for further infection."

Caltrans, which proceeded with the cutting as fast as it could, had hoped to remove the diseased trees before the emergence of those insects.

California Department of Forestry forester Bill Ruskin, who wrote the report adopted by Caltrans that called for the immediate cutting of the 527 trees, said earlier, "If you wait until the warmer weather, those insects will hatch and really complicate matters."

All three experts, however, agree that the cutting is the right method to take. The sooner Caltrans completes the job, the fewer insects will

emerge, they said.

"Caltrans' efforts, if anything, will tend to reduce the risk of spreading the disease," said Fox. "It's critical to get that stuff out of there before they all emerge."

McCain lamented that Caltrans didn't cut the diseased trees last year. "It's a crying shame they didn't remove the trees then," he said.

The pitch canker disease was detected in late 1986. The disease, which initially turns branch tips of pine trees brown, eventually spreads throughout the tree. While the disease normally doesn't kill trees, it weakens them to the point that insects finish the job. There is no known cure for the fungus, which is widespread in the southeastern portion of the country.

Of the 527 trees being cut, nearly 200 of them are located near the fishhook where highways 1 and 17 meet. However, trees are being cut all the way from the Pasatiempo exit of Highway 17 to the Bay Avenue exit in Capitola of Highway 1.

Caltrans removed 78 trees in January, and 62 trees last September. Officials have maintained that many of the felled trees would have been cut with or without pitch canker. The trees, which were planted in the 1950s when the highways were built, were originally planted too close together.

Caltrans will be coming before the Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission in April with a proposed replanting plan. That preliminary plan calls for replanting one tree for every two trees removed.