

Diseased trees

Caltrans back to original plan: Cut 'em down

By ALEXANDRA HAYNE
STAFF WRITER

Caltrans has revised its plans once again concerning cutting down diseased pine trees along Highway 1 in Santa Cruz County.

Manuel Miranda, a landscape specialist with Caltrans, said today that a state task force report due out next week will recommend cutting down trees affected 25 percent or more with pitch canker, a fungus disease that causes pitch-running sores on the trunks, pitch-soaked wood and branch-tip dieback.

That adds up to between 600 and 900 trees, Miranda said. Since pitch canker was first noticed in Santa Cruz County early last summer, Caltrans officials have said trees would have to be cut down.

Their estimates of how many trees must be cut down have ranged from 300 to 1,200, depending upon which expert's opinion is currently prevailing.

"We'll be moving ahead on the dead trees as soon as we get direction from our management," Miranda said. Cutting down dead trees is a normal

part of Caltrans policy, he said, but he doesn't have a good estimate on how many trees are actually dead.

The fate of the trees affected by pitch canker but not yet dead has been the subject of sometimes heated debate. Treatment recommendations have ranged from doing nothing at all, to cutting them all down, to injecting them with fungicide.

Caltrans has been caught in the middle of the debate because many of the sick trees are on its property along the highway.

A plant pathologist from Georgia, who has been studying pitch canker for 10 years, recommended a couple of weeks ago that nothing be done for a year. His experience in the Southeast, where pitch canker is epidemic, has been that the branch-tip browning clears up by itself in a year or two and trees affected even as much as 90 percent can recover.

When Caltrans officials heard that news, the agency abandoned plans to take out all the affected trees. But Miranda explained that the disease seems to be running a different

course in California than in the Southeast.

Caltrans trees, he said, with "anything over 25 to 35 percent dead or dying material have gone ahead and died."

Compounding Caltrans' problems with its trees is the fact that the stands along the highway were overplanted in the first place, Miranda said. Overplanting puts stress on the trees and makes them all the more susceptible to disease, scientists have said.

"When we originally planted those seedlings," he said, "some were expected to die off, but they didn't. So we're overplanted. We have to develop a plan to thin them down the road."

Because of the crowding, Miranda said, plans to replant where trees are taken out have not been developed.

"We would like to address the problem of the dead trees first," he said. "We're already in trouble with the overplanting at this time. But replanting of some kind could be incorporated into the long-range plan."

Miranda said once he gets the go-ahead from his superiors, he will get an accurate count of

the dead trees and decide then whether to have Caltrans crews do the cutting or put the job out to bid.

The wood, he said, would be cut into chips by Louisiana-Pacific, a large lumber and manufacturing concern with equipment capable of chipping even the trunks. The chips would be used in Antioch to fuel a pulp plant.

Another task force recommendation is for some kind of quarantine of affected trees, but Deputy Agriculture Commission Rich Bergman said he expected any quarantine to be "low-key," unlike the road-block-style quarantine that was used for Mediterranean fruit flies.

He said a quarantine would probably entail tree-by-tree inspection at nurseries and Christmas tree farms, and some certification procedure. So far, he said, only one tree in a nursery is suspected of having the disease.

The task force consists of officials from the state departments of food and agriculture, forestry, parks and recreation and Caltrans, and scientists from UC-Berkeley.