

# Ailing trees get reprieve

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**MONTEREY** — A world-renowned expert on pitch canker fungus said Wednesday that the Santa Cruz epidemic could "alleviate itself" in two to three years.

He recommended the state shouldn't "overreact" and follow through on plans to cut down nearly 1,200 diseased trees. Furthermore, he said there is no threat of the disease spreading.

At least one state official said the new information could very well change the state Department of Transportation's plans to cut down the trees — some of which are 60 feet high — that line Highway 1 between Santa Cruz and Aptos.

L. David Dwinell, a plant pathologist with the U.S. Forest Service, Department of Agriculture in Athens, Ga., was flown in by the department to look at the

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## Ailing trees

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situation here. He spoke to a group of about 20, mostly foresters, at a special two-hour session in Department of Forestry offices.

The fungus has infected hundreds of thousands of acres of pine trees throughout the Southeast since 1975. Dwinell has done full-time research on the fungus for the past 10 years.

Locally, pitch canker reportedly has spread to 2,000 to 3,000 pines in a 23-square-mile area. The hotspot is the Highway 1 corridor where Caltrans has earmarked 900 to 1,200 of the browning trees for cutting. Caltrans has moved more quickly because the trees pose safety hazards.

Dwinell said the state — and private citizens as well — "should just back off and not overreact."

He said there was a good chance 75 to 90 percent of the trees "dieback" has already occurred. The trees could already be in a "recovery stage."

Dwinell went on to say, "More often than not, two or three years later, the trees could be back to normal. I think the situation in Santa Cruz will eventually alleviate itself."

Caltrans is using the figure that if 25 percent of an individual tree is infected, it should be cut down. Dwinell said he would cut only those trees that are "100 percent infected."

Contrary to popular belief that diseased trees should be cut down before pitch canker spreads further, Dwinell said there is no threat of it spreading. He said the fungus "evolved" with the planting of the trees.

"What caused the disease to come out now, I don't know," he added, in noting the fungus poses no threat to agricultural or horticultural crops.

Brian Barrette, assistant chief of forest management for the state Department of Forestry in Sacramento, said later that Dwinell's advice will probably change the Inter-Agency Workshop Committee's recommendation to cut down the trees.

He said a draft report recommends the trees be cut. "But the draft also didn't have his (Dwinell's) input," he added.

According to Barrette, the draft report recommends the state designate the fungus a "class A" pest. This means eradication should begin immediately. Up to now, "eradica-

tion" of pitch canker meant to cutting infected trees down.

Barrette said he "wouldn't be surprised" to see the interagency committee's recommendation drop to class B or C.

A class-B designation would give Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commissioner Lenord Craft a wide range of options, from eradicating the disease to taking no action. A class-C designation means no action is dictated.

Caltrans officials could not be reached for comment. However, Caltrans is waiting for the committee's final plan before beginning to cut down the trees.

It has been such a foregone conclusion that the trees will need to come down that several Caltrans officials have said the cutting could begin in three months.

Local University of California Cooperative Extension Farm Advisor Steve Tjosvold, who was at the Monterey meeting, said later he was "encouraged" with Dwinell's information.

"Personally, I never was for clear-cutting along the highway," he added.

The interagency committee studying the Santa Cruz disease is made up of scientists and officials from Caltrans, the Department of Forestry and the Department of Food and Agriculture. Their final plan will be go to state Department of Food and Agriculture Director Claire Berryhill in a few weeks. Berryhill will then classify the disease into the state's action-oriented system.

When asked if he had any action plan to give Caltrans, Dwinell said that some "thinning out" of pines along Highway 1 "could be beneficial" in the future.

Such thinning would mean cutting down some trees in "overstocked stands."

Dwinell said the pines along Highway 1 could be considered "overstocked" because they were planted on the site in somewhat of a "stress situation," too close together and close to a freeway.

He said that pitch canker has principally been a problem in pines that have been transplanted in an area. It has not been detected in native pines.

"The only way to guarantee you accomplish anything, though, would be to cut all the pines down," he added.