

Heritage trees or renegades?



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Peter Martin believes that blue gum eucalyptus are a threat to biodiversity in Santa Cruz County.

Eucalyptus trees spur debate

By ROBIN MUSITELLI
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Mention blue gum eucalyptus to Peter Martin, and he'll tell you about the imperialist invader of ecosystems and the California dream gone awry.

Blue gum eucalyptus is a renegade species that has run wild in Santa Cruz, he contends, bullying out all competition while posing an extreme fire danger to residents.

"And to top it off, this villain of the ecosystem, though lovely to some, is wrongly awarded special protection under Santa Cruz's heritage tree ordinance, he contends.

"Instead of being part of our heritage, blue gum trees destroy our heritage of indigenous flora," said Martin.

A journalist-real estate agent, Martin recently has completed a 130-page study of the Tasmanian, or blue gum eucalyptus, concluding that the blue gum is a threat to biodiversity and presents a fire danger so great it has "transformed Santa Cruz into a tinder

■ *Changes proposed to heritage ordinance — Page A4*

■ *Who needs to clear their weeds — Page A4*

box waiting for a match."

His report is being used as the basis of argument by Scotts Valley attorney Gerald Bowden, who is working on behalf of several homeowners to remove the blue gum from Santa Cruz's heritage tree protections.

"The main thing wrong with the heritage tree ordinance is that it makes no distinction among varieties of trees," says Bowden. "It treats acacia, a weed tree, and eucalyptus, with the same kind of dignity you would give to a redwood" and other native trees.

Not only does the tree not merit use of public funds for protection, it is not fair to force residents to accept the risk of having to live among the eucalyptus trees, Bowden contends.

Bowden suggests an amendment to

the ordinance allowing residents to remove the blue gum and replace it with a native species.

"The failure to make those distinctions casts the tree ordinance into a degree of skepticism that breeds contempt for the law," says Bowden. "People don't think it's reasonable."

Rudy Quintanar, superintendent of parks in Santa Cruz, says it's unlikely city staff would recommend the tree be dropped from the heritage tree list altogether.

But Quintanar concedes the city is taking a different view of the blue gum eucalyptus since the 1991 Oakland fire. Officials are more liberal in allowing their removal, especially if a homeowner plans to replace the trees with native species, he said. Revisions of the heritage tree to that effect are under consideration, said Quintanar.

Another measure of the changed perspective is the city's own proposal to replace eucalyptus trees at DeLaveaga Golf Course with native spe-

Please see EUCALYPTUS — A4

Eucalyptus

Continued from Page A1

cies, he noted.

But Quintanar maintains the trees are not a fire hazard if their branches underneath are cleaned and the groves thinned.

"We're not backing off seeing the eucalyptus as a heritage tree. But in context of its total management, different views are being taken," he said.

"If you manage the understory (lower branches), then the groves become manageable and they're not these Roman candles that are ready to explode," said Quintanar.

Martin, however, concluded the tree is unparalleled in its destructiveness.

While hundreds of species of eucalyptus trees are not dangerous, the Tasmanian blue gum — *eucalyptus globulus* — is able to kill all competing vegetation by giving off powerful toxins, he pointed out.

"Wherever they grow, blue gums are territorial invaders and become the region's climax vegetation," said Martin.

The trees have no natural enemies — almost no other tree or shrub ground cover can withstand their toxins — and their sole native Australian parasite is seldom found in California, he contends.

Blue gum eucalyptus also have the dubious distinction of being perhaps the most incendiary species of tree in the world, according to Martin.

The trees exude fragrant but highly combustible oils that permeate its bark, limbs and leaves.

That is why California fire-fighters have nicknamed them "gasoline trees" and "widow makers," he contends. The bigger, taller, older trees are far more saturated with oils and therefore more dangerous than younger trees.

Unlike most other trees, the blue gum sheds its bark, which then litters the ground with "kindling" while simultaneously killing competitive species. The bark hangs from the tree in long strips, providing what fire fighters call "ladders," which contribute to the upward spread of the fire.

In fire, the blue gum is seldom destroyed; only its top or crown is blasted off like a miniature cannon, said Martin. The fiery crown is propelled by fire-generated thermal currents and other winds far enough to span freeways as it did in the Oakland Hills fire.

In Oakland, when a wind-driven blaze roared through the hills, drought-dry eucalyptus trees passed the fire like torches from house to house.

Martin cites UC Berkeley studies that found 70 percent of the energy released in the Oakland fire from vegetative matter came from the blue gum.

The tree shares an unusual relationship with wildfire: fire promotes its growth, and it promotes fire, according to Martin.

Through wildfire, the blue gum prepares soil for new seedlings, eliminates whatever remaining vegetative competition its toxins could not destroy and spreads its seeds.

Imported from Australia between 1825 to 1925 as a fast-growing windscreen and lumber tree — although they proved too brittle to log — the blue gum is the most common species of eucalyptus in the county.

Suggested rule changes

By ROBIN MUSITELLI

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Changes proposed to Santa Cruz's heritage tree ordinance would make it more expensive, but somewhat easier, to remove eucalyptus trees and replace them with other trees.

Among the proposed revisions are application fees to remove heritage trees. An application to remove one to three trees would cost \$25 and each tree beyond that would cost \$10, according to Rudy Quintanar, superintendent of parks in Santa Cruz.

At present there are no application fees.

Suggested new rules would also require an that applicant pay for an arborist's report on the trees to be removed and in some cases, a reforestation plan, he said.

The arborists report could be required when more than three trees are proposed to be removed.

The proposals will be the subject of a public workshop from 7-9 p.m. Friday before the Heritage Tree ordinance task-force. The workshop will be in the City Council Chamber, 809 Center St., Santa Cruz.

The ordinance will then be the subject of a hearing at 4 p.m. Monday before the city's Parks and Recreation Commission.

If approved by the commission, the Santa Cruz City Council is tentatively scheduled to consider the changes on May 25, said Quintanar.

The majority of blue gum eucalyptus in Santa Cruz grows on city or state-owned property, such as Harvey West Park, DeLaveaga Park, Moore Creek Canyon, Arroyo Seco and Natural Bridges State Park.

Other stands are near schools: Harbor High, Loma Prieta High, DeLaveaga Elementary School and La Fonda Children's Center.

Aerial photographs of eucalyptus groves in Santa Cruz show the species has been gobbling up ground ever since, acting as vegetative bullies, said Martin.

Because of their fast growth, the trees can reach the 16-inch diameter heritage trees status in about 16 years, and then cannot be cut down in Santa Cruz without a permit.

That, says Martin, is comparable to demanding that one fifth or more of the homeowners in Santa Cruz keep a 20-gallon barrel of gasoline in their garages.

Martin concedes that the blue gum is not without its attributes. To their credit, the trees smell good, look good in holiday wreaths — and monarch butterflies overwinter in selected groves, said Martin.

Still, those arguments may be overrated, he said.

"The fact that these butterflies have chosen the blue gum eucalyptus within Santa Cruz does not signify that they are dependent on