

Trees

UP FRONT

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Area Forests Losing Their Trees

Deadly fungus continues killing county trees

by Helen Meservey

WE COULD SURE USE THE Lorax now.

Dr. Seuss's little creature who speaks for the trees — because they can't speak for themselves — could have a full-time job in Santa Cruz County. Well-known are the many battles for trees in the mountainous area of the county, typically played out between those who would cut them down for lumber and profit and those who would prefer to let them stand.

But not so famous is the more silent plague of the trees here, a fungal infestation that for the last 10 years or so has been killing trees slowly, rotting them from the outside in and causing them to wither and die.

Deadly infestation

The infestation is called Pine Pitch Canker, an insidious fungus that attacks pine trees, especially the endangered Monterey Pine. Also susceptible to this disease are eight other native species including Douglas fir, Ponderosa and Bishop. Typically, older trees become infested, dying within only a few years.

"We can expect to lose about 80 percent of the Monterey Pines in Santa Cruz County over the next 10 years," predicts Karl Kolb, tree chairman of the Rio Del Mar Improvement Association, which has been charting the plague. "It's really a disaster because there's nothing you can



Environmental activists say the silent plague of Pine Pitch Canker that infests Monterey Pines like this one along Highway 1 near 41st Avenue threatens to decimate 80 percent of the species in Santa Cruz County in the next 10 years.

do about it. It's just a disaster."

Only three stands of Monterey Pine remain — in Año Nuevo State Reserve, in Cambria north of San Luis Obispo and on the Monterey Peninsula.

Assemblyman Fred Keeley won approval for a \$100,000 state budget appropriation for the problem, earmarking \$35,000 for additional research and \$65,000 for the disposal of diseased trees. But the proposal could be in jeopardy now that Gov. Pete Wilson

has determined to repay the \$1.2 billion settlement to the public employees retirement system from the current budget, according to John Decker, a consultant working with Keeley.

Last April, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors approved several measures aimed at stemming the spread of the virus, including directing public works officials in the proper removal and disposal of stricken trees.

Pine Pitch Canker is not native to this

geographic area. Researchers believe the disease, found in the southeastern United States, Haiti, South Africa, Japan and Mexico, was introduced to California by diseased firewood, lumber, seedlings, infected tree parts or via contaminated tools. Native insects such as twig, cone and bark beetles can also become contaminated with the fungus, serving as a vector for further infestation.

Decade of deterioration

First identified in 1986 in New Brighton Beach in Capitola and in Alameda County, the infestation is now found in 17 coastal and adjacent inland counties from Mendocino to San Diego, according to the California Forest Pest Council Pitch Canker task force. Researchers also fear that the disease could be spread to other native pines in the Coast and Cascade Ranges and in the Sierra Nevada, as "circumstantial evidence implicates humans as the primary agents of long distance spread."

Last month, Caltrans announced plans to remove more than 300 diseased trees, mostly Monterey Pines, from the Highway 1 corridor along the length of Santa Cruz County. Officials expect the \$125,000 job to begin this month and to continue through the year.

Kolb estimates that at least 2,000 Monterey Pines in this county have been stricken and killed by the virus in the last 10 years.

"Everyday, there are trees going out around the county," he says. "It's something that cannot be treated and we have no cure for it. In plain language, it's just a disaster."

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