



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

A tree worker cuts Monterey pines afflicted with pitch canker in Rio del Mar on Monday.

## \$2.1 million earmarked for tree-ailment cure

By **MICHAEL MERRILL**  
Sentinel staff writer

**SANTA CRUZ** — Areas along the California coast are expected to lose up to 95 percent of their Monterey pine trees over the next 15 years, prompting local lawmakers to work together to help save the picturesque trees.

Earlier this month Gov. Pete Wilson approved a bill, SB 1712, co-authored by Sen. Bruce McPherson, R-Santa Cruz, and Assemblyman Fred Keeley, D-Boulder Creek, that calls for \$350,000 a year for the next six years — a total of \$2.1 million — for pitch canker surveying, monitoring, research and public awareness.

The funds would go to the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's Pitch Canker Task Force.

### Pitch canker may claim 95 percent of area's scenic Monterey pines

Pitch canker is a fungus that primarily affects Monterey, bishop and knobcone pines. In laboratory tests, other pines and Douglas fir also were shown to be susceptible.

Don Owen, CDF entomologist and task force chairman, said the state has more at stake financially than many people realize.

"If it gets into any of the timber species, especially ponderosa pine, which is one of the major species harvested commercially, it would have a devastating effect on the timber industry," Owen said.

Although Monterey pines are not harvested commercially, the loss of vast numbers of them will also have a large financial impact, especially locally, where it can cost as much as \$1,000 to remove a dead tree.

"Monterey pines entail a huge cost for removal when they die," Owen said. "Property values change when you take a mature tree down and their loss will have a significant effect on tourism as well — especially."

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ly in Monterey and Cambria, where the trees make up a backdrop for tourism."

California's first pitch canker case was identified in 1986 at New Brighton Beach in Capitola.

Researchers believe it was transported to the area on firewood or lumber from Mexico or the southeastern United States, where pitch canker has been a problem for at least 50 years.

The hardest-hit areas are the San Francisco Bay Area, Monterey Bay area, Santa Cruz County and coastal sections of San Luis Obispo County, Owen said.

The disease continues to claim trees at an alarming rate in Santa Cruz, where municipal tree-maintenance worker Steve Gomez said the city is losing two or three trees each week.

"It's stump city out there," Gomez said. "It depends on the vigor of the

trees. Some fight the disease for several months and some go very quickly."

There is no known cure for the disease, so researchers say they hope to breed trees that are resistant to the fungus.

This requires extensive research, Owen said, because some trees are truly resistant while some trees have no symptoms and only appear to be resistant.

Owen said the task force, now that it has been allocated additional state funding, is in the process of setting up an aggressive pitch canker counteroffensive.

"Our first step is to locate and identify resistant trees that occur naturally," Owen said.

"Slowing the spread is our second priority and a big effort has been put forth in educating the public so people don't inadvertently help spread the disease."

He said what typically happens is someone will cut up a dead tree for firewood and transport it to their

home where the firewood can infect trees on their property and surrounding properties.

The pitch canker fungus can live up to a year in dead wood.

While human intervention has played a role in the spread of the disease, Owen said the primary vehicle for its spread is insects, most often the bark beetle.

He said the task force has looked into attacking the problem by eliminating the bark beetle.

But with infected trees in 17 counties covering more than 23 million acres, that approach has been ruled out.

"It would require spraying every tree with insecticide," Owen said. "That would be impossible."

Identifying the disease is not difficult. Cankers usually develop on a tree's main trunk but can occur on lateral branches.

Copious resin flows from trunk cankers and the wood beneath the cankers is resin-soaked.