

# Pine trees suffering mysterious ailment

By Alexandra Hayne

The county's Monterey pine trees have been attacked by gall wasps and perhaps some other ailment that so far has baffled state forestry officials.

Affected trees are mostly along

Highway 1 between Highway 17 and the Park Avenue exit, although some reports of branch browning have come from residential areas elsewhere.

David Soho, resource manager at the Department of Forestry office in Felton, says that the department's pathologist took samples Aug. 28.

"The pathologist hasn't seen this one for a long time," Soho said. "This is one he hasn't seen on Monterey pines."

Soho said that foresters noticed the damage in late July and called in

the pathologist. Affected twigs and branches turn brown and have unusual swellings at the ends, he said, with some pitch exuding from the area of the swelling.

The insect damage looks different from the yearly browning and dropping of the pines' old needles, Soho said. In a healthy tree, the tips of the branches are green even though interior needles may be brown. In the trees affected by this pest, the browning begins at the tips.

Last week, the insect responsible for most of the symptoms was identified as the gall wasp, said

Forester Bill Ruskin.

The gall wasp is not considered to be a serious problem, as it doesn't endanger the life of the pines, said Ruskin. With gall wasp infestations, however, "we normally wouldn't be seeing limbs dying," said Ruskin, as is the case with some of the trees.

The forester said more samples will have to be taken and analyzed to pin down whatever mysterious ailment besides gall wasps may be afflicting the pine trees.

Some of the trees in the county, particularly those in Rio del Mar, simply are nearing the ends of their lives and don't look very good, Soho said. The Monterey pine lives only about 50 or 60 years under the best conditions, he said, and the 40- to 45-year-old specimens in Rio del Mar have had the added stresses of passing traffic, paving and planting over their root areas and haphazard topping and pruning.

Ruskin, who accompanied pathologist David Adams, said that it looks like the infestation is moving south.

"At Highway 17 and 1," he said, "the trees were affected maybe last year. The trees at New Brighton were affected a little more recently."

Ruskin said that once the pest has been identified, a program of treatment could be started.

"We're probably talking about spraying," he said. "It's just mostly unsightly. It doesn't look like the trees are being killed outright. But a bug like this can weaken a tree and make it more susceptible to other insects."

Stresses such as pollutants along a highway can also make a tree more susceptible to bugs and diseases, he said.

The Monterey pine, Soho noted, is particularly susceptible to pests and diseases.