

Sap-sucking pest arrives from Australia

Imported insect leaves eucalyptus vulnerable

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SANTA CRUZ — First, the tan oaks started dying mysteriously. Then California live oaks.

Now a pest that attacks eucalyptus trees has arrived.

This one is a red gum lerp psyllid that has traveled here from its native Australia.

Psyllids, small insects that suck

sap from leaves, don't kill the trees. But they cause eucalyptus leaves to drop and can stress the trees, making them susceptible to fatal attack by other insects such as longhorned beetles.

The psyllids also produce large amounts of a sticky substance called honeydew, which stains the ground beneath trees and causes the fallen

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leaves to stick to everything. A sooty mold grows on the honeydew-covered surfaces. In severe infestations, thousands of lerps cover the ground and understory, like hail.

"It's a terrible nuisance," said Kleine Lettunich, whose eucalyptus grove in Watsonville has come under attack.

Lettunich said her trees look like they have "the world's worst case of pimples."

The red gum lerp psyllid is the first lerp psyllid to make its way from Australia to California, according to Donald Dahlsten, an entomologist with UC Berkeley's Center for Biological Control.

It was discovered along a freeway in Los Angeles County in June 1998. Since then, it has been found on the Stanford campus in Palo Alto and other locations in the South and East Bay.

It was found in Santa Cruz County in June, Dahlsten said.

Dahlsten and others are trying to develop a biological control program using insect predators that feed on the psyllid rather than chemical pesticides.

In the meantime, Lettunich said she is learning to live with lerps.

"It's like an alien has come to my eucalyptus grove," she said.

The lerp psyllid is the most recent in a series of tree assailants to come to the county.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Corralitos resident Kleine Lettunich examines a clump of diseased eucalyptus leaves.

Experts are still stumped over what's killing tan oak trees, a hardwood that is common in coastal forests in California and Oregon. This past year, thousands have died countywide.

Although the death is not caused by insects, experts say western oak beetles and ambrosia beetles reproduce by the millions in the dying tan oaks. The dead trees then serve as a staging base for new brood beetles, which then attack and kill nearby live oaks that appear healthy.