

Trees

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Local news

Hundreds of ailing trees to be cut along Highway 1

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Motorists may soon notice sparser landscaping along Highway 1.

More than 300 trees along the road will be removed after falling victim to the pitch canker fungus. The infected trees — mostly Monterey Pines — span the length of the highway through the county. Caltrans will start hauling away the trees in the next month or so once a contract for the \$125,000 job is drawn. There are no plans yet to replant.

The trees are the latest casualties of the virulent disease. And au-

thorities warn that many more will meet the same fate. "You can expect this to continue for several years," said Val Houdyshell of Caltrans.

The tree removal will likely be accompanied by traffic delays. Work needs to be done during the day, so expect occasional lane and ramp closures. The project could take up to a year.

Stricken trees are a potential traffic hazard because dead branches or entire trees can fall on the roadway. Dry, leafless trees also can pose a fire danger. Removing the trees is part of a decade-long effort to eradicate pitch can-

ker. Hundreds of trees were removed from the Fishhook in 1988.

A few years later, several hundred more were cut down along Highway 1 from Santa Cruz to Aptos. In February, another 250 dead or dying trees along Highway 17 in Scotts Valley were uprooted.

The fungal disease, known to scientists as *Fusarium moniliforme*, was first found in California when it was identified in 1986 at Capitola's New Brighton State Beach. It turns branches, trunk and exposed roots brown and usually kills the trees within four years.

Found in the Southeast and in

Mexico, pitch canker is believed to have been introduced to California pines by infected firewood or lumber. It also can be spread by beetles, pruning tools and seedlings. At least 16 other counties from Mendocino to San Diego are grappling with the epidemic. Experts say pitch canker could kill as much as 85 percent of the Monterey pines native to California.

Assemblyman Fred Keeley is seeking help from the state. He has proposed that the state allot \$100,000 toward the problem. Some \$35,000 would go toward research and \$65,000 for the disposal of stricken trees. Lawmakers have

not yet reached an agreement on the budget which includes the provision. So far, it has passed through the legislative conference committee but still needs approval from both houses and the governor.

On the county level, officials are taking a more active approach. At the behest of Supervisor Walt Symons, the planning department has removed the Monterey pine — and other trees susceptible to the deadly fungus — from the list of trees recommended for planting in the area.

Meanwhile, a regional pitch canker task force is developing a plan

for long-term solutions. The two-year-old organization is a committee of the California Forest Pest Council and is made up of government, private and non-profit groups. Karl Kolb of the Rio del Mar Improvement Association belongs to the task force and sits in on Supervisor Symon's behalf. Pitch canker should not be taken lightly and deserves prompt attention, he said.

"If we lose all these trees in the county it's really going to have an impact," he said, "not just as far as the environment goes, but economically too."