

# Dying trees stump experts

## Tree pathologist is called in to test tan oaks

By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**

Sentinel staff writer

**SANTA CRUZ** — Something is killing tan oak trees in the Santa Cruz Mountains and even the experts are stumped.

"It's not time to panic, but we're definitely concerned," said Geoffrey Holmes, a forestry inspector for the California Department of Forestry. "There's definitely something going on."

Tan oaks, also known as tanbark oaks, are a staple in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where thousands of them grow among the redwoods.

The hardwood trees were first harvested in the 1900s for their bark, which was used to tan leather.

Now tan oaks are used primarily for firewood — and by wildlife that eat the acorns. Holmes said he first noticed tan oaks dying on his own property about five years ago.

This past year a noticeable number have died all over the county, enough so that a



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Linda Hird checks out a dying tan oak, with white leaves at right, one of 10 of the trees dying near her Boulder Creek home.

handful of property owners called to ask him what was going on, he said.

Holmes called in a CDF pathologist, entomologist and other experts a few months ago to take samples from tan oaks along Granite Creek Road.

So far, they don't have an answer.

Whatever it is seems to be spread county-wide, but some areas are more affected than others, Holmes said.

Also, it doesn't appear to be insect-related, and young and old trees alike are being attacked. The dying trees appear to be

grouped, but not all of the trees in a group are killed, he said.

The experts suspect it's a fungus, but don't know for sure. They're trying to grow it to confirm their suspicions, he said.

"If it's a native fungus, it may just be a cyclic thing," Holmes said. "If it's non-native, it could be of more concern."

Holmes said the trees may have been affected during the El Niño winter two years ago, and are just now dying. But, he adds, "this is total speculation at this point."

Boulder Creek resident Doug Hird has

about 15 dead trees near his home.

"The leaves start to turn brown and within a few days the tree is dead," Hird said.

Hird tried trimming lower branches to see if the trees could be saved, but wasn't successful. "By the time you notice they're dying, they're gone," he said.

Steve Tjosvold, farm advisor for Santa Cruz County, said a similar problem was noticed two years ago in Sonoma County, but the cause wasn't identified.

An unconfirmed case also has been reported in Big Sur, he said. "It's only this last year that it has become epidemic in the Santa Cruz Mountains," he said.

"I don't think it's a disease organism that's attacking the top of the plant. I think it's more some root or crown pathogen, is my guess," Tjosvold said.

Tjosvold recommended affected trees be cut down, and that the wood be disposed of or burned. Any wood kept for firewood should be kept on site and, as a precaution, covered so insects and fungus spores don't spread.

Tjosvold said a plant pathologist is due in the area in a few weeks to take more samples.

When, and if, the cause is identified, however, it might not make much difference, Holmes said.

"The reality of it is that even if we determine what the problem is, we might not be able to do anything about it."