

Loggers attempt to slow spread

By JOHN ROBINSON
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SWANTON — A forest is dying on the North Coast of Santa Cruz, as a fatal fungal disease has spread into one of California's last stands of native Monterey pines.

Rust-colored crowns of dead pine branches now mar the evergreen ridges of Swanton, Waddell Canyon and the Chalk Mountains behind Ano Nuevo State Reserve.

It is the tell-tale color of pitch canker disease, a fungus which has killed thousands of Monterey pines elsewhere in the county, and for which no cure or way to slow the spread of the deadly spores has been found.

"Some of the scientists thought it wouldn't affect the native stands, but it has been snowballing in the last month," said Lud McCrary, of Big Creek Lumber, as he looked over the Swanton ridges where he grew up. "Now others are saying that in 10 years there won't be any Monterey pines left."

Scientists are uncertain how severe the die-off will be.

But if the fungus continues to spread, the pine forests which now run almost to the sea will retreat, replaced by meadows and scrub brush, except for isolated stands of Douglas fir and redwoods growing in the shaded valleys.

It will alter the scenic appearance of the North Coast, and poses a significant fire danger as thousands of dry, dead trees fill the forest.

"We're concerned what it is going to look like," said Gary Strachan, head ranger at Ano Nuevo reserve. "Unless somebody comes up with a technique to slow down or eradicate it, nothing's going to be done."

In the past month, Big Creek Lumber and state park workers have attempted to slow the dis-

ease by cutting thousands of infected trees in the Swanton and Ano Nuevo areas. The trees are milled into fence posts and such. The left over branches and bark are burned.

If the cutting doesn't slow the infestation, it at least will lessen the fire danger, McCrary hopes.

Pitch canker was found in California at New Brighton State Beach in 1986, according to Stephen Staub, a forester with the Pitch Canker Task Force, a group formed two years ago to investigate the disease.

The fungus is believed to have come from Mexico and is found in the Southwestern United States. Infestations in those areas are nowhere near as virulent as in California, Staub said.

The disease quickly spread from the New Brighton area, most noticeably killing hundreds of Monterey pines along area freeways. According to Staub those pines were planted by Caltrans from stock raised in New Zealand and Australia.

Scientists were uncertain how the fungus spread, but are now concentrating on nine species of

beetles which commonly infest the trees in the Santa Cruz area. Two of the beetles have been confirmed as disease carriers.

The variety of insects carrying the fungus makes it difficult to fight.

The pine's natural defense of secreting large amounts of sap, which runs down the infected tree's trunk, is useful against insect infestation, but not fungus.

"Originally there was a great scare, and when we heard it was getting into the native population, we thought it would sweep through and they would be gone," Staub said. "But now we are much more cautious about predicting the end of the species."

Monterey pines live about 100 years. Fossil records show the species has been on the Central Coast for millions of years.

"They've been here during all kinds of climatic changes," Staub said. "During the ice ages when the coastline was two to four miles farther out, there was a more continuous population."

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Pitch canker

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Monterey pine forests could once be found from Point Reyes to Santa Barbara.

"Formerly they were a lot more extensive than they are now," Staub said. "There is no resolution to the academic debate on whether the species is on it's way in or out."

Staub expects the species to survive, but the forest is in transition.

McCrary has lived through a forest change within his life.

As a boy the Monterey pine groves stopped short of the coastal cliffs and the rolling lands along Swanton Road.

"They used to call them bull pines," McCrary said. "The old-timers considered it a weed. My neighbors would pull the little ones out that were growing in the pastures."

An aerial photograph of

Swanton in 1928 shows almost no Monterey pines, according to McCrary. Most of the trees near the ocean bluffs are about the same age as McCrary, and he has watched them grow.

"During World War II we used to have a civil observation platform on top of one of the ridges," McCrary said. "As kids we spent a lot of time looking down from there for Japanese planes or ships."

"I remember vividly the time we saw a Japanese submarine. They took some World War I French artillery guns being used to protect the cement plant and fired at it from Greyhound Rock," McCrary said. "They didn't come within a half-mile, but the sub got under way. Now you can't even see the ocean from there, the Monterey pines are so thick. ... It's real sad to see them die."

Canker hits native pines



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos
Loggers from Big Creek Lumber Co. harvest some of the diseased Monterey pines in Swanton.