

Caltrans plans to remove 62 trees killed by disease

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Caltrans has identified 62 dead trees on its property along Highway 1 in Santa Cruz County that have to be cut down immediately.

"It's not like we're going to buzz saw the whole grove," Jim Claypool, senior maintenance engineer for Caltrans, said today, "and it's only for traffic safety."

The trees were killed by pitch canker, a fungus disease that has affected thousands of trees in a 23-square-mile area in Santa Cruz County. The disease causes pitch-running sores on the trunks, pitch-soaked wood, and branch-tip dieback. It was first spotted in Santa Cruz

County last summer, and has since been identified in Monterey, Santa Clara, San Mateo and Alameda counties.

Many of the diseased trees are on Caltrans land along the highway, especially at the interchange of highways 1 and

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17. Most of the dead ones that must be removed are at that interchange, Claypool said.

Claypool said Caltrans officials were planning to meet with county planning department staff members and the county agricultural commissioner Wednesday to outline plans for the trees. After the dead trees have been removed, he said, Caltrans then plans to develop a long-range strategy for dealing with its trees.

Part of the problem, scientists have said, is that Caltrans groves are planted too tightly, making it difficult for sick trees to recover. The disease normally doesn't kill trees. Claypool agreed Caltrans needs to look at its overall landscap-

ing methods.

"We tend to overplant on the original things," he said, "and then we don't do a very good job taking them out. Part of this idea is we need some more air circulation."

Any replanting has to be part of the long-range plan, he said. Caltrans would take into consideration visual impact as well as tree health, Claypool said, and would hold whatever public hearings required.

"What we're trying to do is whatever's right," he said. "and keep things in perspective. CDF (the state department of forestry) is the lead agency. We only do what they tell us. But if something becomes a traffic hazard or a problem for the travelling public, we have to take care of it."

At one point, as many as 1,200 Caltrans trees were slated for removal. Claypool said this was because, at first, scientists thought total eradication of the disease would be possible. However, further study has shown it would be just about impossible to eradicate the disease even if all the trees were cut down, so Caltrans has limited its removal program to the 62 "completely dead" trees, Claypool said.