



The Santa Cruz City Council will consider allowing non-native blue gum eucalyptus trees, such as these lining the railroad tracks near some West Cliff Drive condominiums, to be removed under changes to the heritage tree ordinance. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Fiery debate

Non-native blue gum eucalyptuses fuel dispute on fire safety

Trees

By MAX LOPEZ

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WATSONVILLE — Sharon Begley hates blue gum eucalyptuses.

"I consider them California's tallest weed," she said. "They are a pox on the landscape."

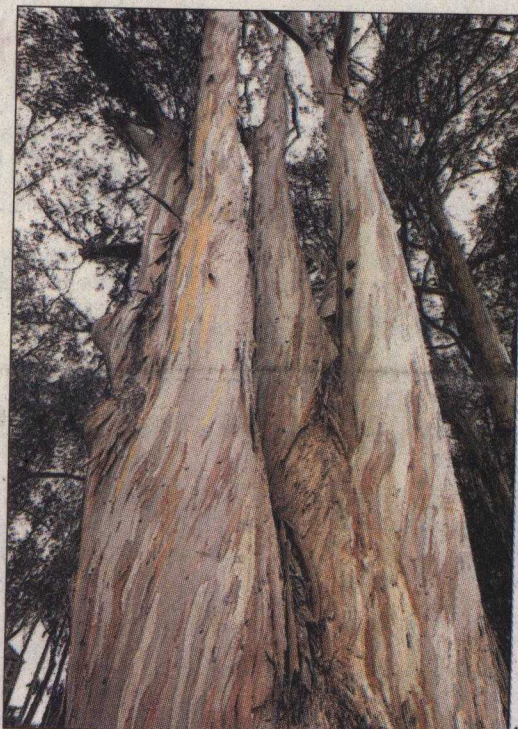
Begley and son Bruce blame eucalyptuses for the Trabling Fire that consumed their Watsonville home more than five years ago. The blaze is one of five major fires in Santa Cruz County since 2008, several of which authorities say were fueled in part by blue gum eucalyptus groves.

The flammability of the non-native species has sparked a debate over whether eucalyptuses should be eradicated, better managed or preserved. The Santa Cruz City Council on Tuesday will discuss changes in the city's heritage tree ordinance that would allow property owners to request removal of large trees because they are eucalyptuses or acacias, another non-native variety.

Fire officials agree that while blue gum eucalyptuses are highly flammable, there are ways for homeowners to protect their property short of toppling every eucalyptus. Big-tree activists say discussion of the blue gum's flammability is dominated by myth and exaggeration.

A 2009 study co-written by Jenn Yost, ecology and evolutionary biology doctoral candidate at UC Santa Cruz, states eucalyptuses have become the most abundant, ecologically successful and controversial exotic trees in California since their introduction in the 1850s.

Yost said not all of the blue gum's supposedly negative attributes are exaggerated, but also cautioned that lumping together the tree's flammability and non-native status is a mistake. Most



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL
The Santa Cruz City Council will consider allowing non-native heritage trees such as acacias and the blue gum eucalyptus, pictured here, to be taken out if property owners make a request.

IF YOU GO

SANTA CRUZ CITY COUNCIL

WHAT: Discussion of heritage tree ordinance revisions including allowing property owners to request removal of large trees because they are eucalyptuses or acacias.

WHEN: 7 p.m. Tuesday

WHERE: Council chamber, 809 Center St.

INFORMATION: www.cityofsantacruz.com

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eucalyptuses introduced to California are "well-behaved, non-invasive, beautiful trees," she said.

Native to Australia, the blue gum eucalyptus is one of about 300 species brought to California and the most common on the California coast, according to Yost's study. Originally imported as oddities, soon after investors saw the potential for eucalyptus timber. As California's forestry and fuel economy has developed, thousands of acres of eucalyptus remain standing, unharvested.

FIRE CONCERNS

Sharon and Bruce Begley said the eucalyptuses planted in orderly lines along Highway 1 parallel to Trabing Road were originally intended for railroad ties but were found to make poor lumber. For the Begleys, the trees represent a legacy of destruction, not development.

Sharon Begley, 72, remembers being in Southern California when she received the life-changing call that her house was burning. Her children wouldn't let her return home for more than a week, she said, and she was forced to coordinate the situation from afar.

"My daughter and granddaughter were at the property and they called me when they realized it was really a fire," she said. "My brother-in-law broke the news to me. We turned on the television and watched my house burn down live on CNN. Nine people were displaced in my family at once."

More than five years later, the Begleys' home is the only one destroyed that has not been rebuilt. Begley lives in a trailer on her property, surrounded by her neighbors'

eucalyptus groves.

"Eucalyptus trees were definitely a factor," Bruce Begley, 37, said. "Without them, fighting the fire would have been much easier. Personally, I hate them."

Greg Estrada, Pajaro Valley Fire Protection District battalion chief who served as the incident commander, said he has dealt with several eucalyptus fires but the Trabling blaze beat them all.

The fire was sparked on June 20, 2008, and by the time it had been contained two days later, the flames had burned 630 acres and destroyed 26 homes and 49 outbuildings.

Burning bits of bark were carried thousands of feet into the air, pelting air tanker pilots and raining flames, Estrada said. The embers scattered, creating hundreds of tiny fires that were soon absorbed into the main flames.

He said two factors made the fire so intense: eucalyptuses and the weather.

"The trees and the drought we'd had for several years before the fire combined to make what occurred that day," he said. "If it had been the same fire in a different type of fuel like grass or brush, I don't think it would have posed the problems it did that day."

Former Santa Cruz Fire Chief Ron Prince also headed Santa Barbara's Fire Department for three years, during which time he organized the response to four major fires. He said the power of any particular blaze is usually the sum of several factors.

Prince, 59, was on the scene for the Tea Fire in 2008 that destroyed 237 homes in 20 hours, including structures inside Santa Barbara city limits. He attributes the fire's destructive effects to a combination of 70-mile sundowner winds and blue gum eucalyptuses.

"I'm not an expert, but

mostly in my experience the blue gum has a lot of litter that comes off the tree," Prince said. "Shreds of bark with a lot of flammable oil definitely helped accelerate the fire more than a lot of other trees would."

Prince sees the potential for a major urban fire in Santa Cruz such as those he experienced in Santa Barbara. What has helped avoid a serious fire in the city has to do with marine influence and the lack of sundowner winds, he said.

The possibility of a destructive urban fire in the Santa Cruz area is "not a matter of if," he said. "It's a matter of when."

After a second dry winter, the U.S. Drought Monitor lists California now as experiencing severe drought. Estrada said conditions are similar to those seen right before the Trabling Fire, and he urges a 100-foot clearance around all structures.

"Even if you live in or near a eucalyptus grove, if you were to maintain that defensible space at least your home has a fighting chance," he said. "If you don't maintain that clearance, the odds are greatly reduced that the house will stand when a fire passes through."

BLUE GUM DEFENDERS

In July, Santa Cruz posted new rules that would allow property owners to request the removal of heritage trees — those at least 44 inches in diameter — if they are eucalyptuses or acacias. The changes were put on hold after a local law firm called for stricter environmental review, but that matter has since been resolved by an unrelated court decision.

Gillian Greensite, a member of Save Our Big Trees and a certified California naturalist, supports the planting and cultivation of native species but not the

removal of mature trees simply because they are non-native. Although she empathizes with fire victims, Greensite said eucalyptuses get a bad rap although they "are no more flammable than Douglas fir and pine."

"I think it's coming from the point of view of a small segment of people who would like to remove everything that's non-native and return it to the state it was in prior to the 1850s," she said. "While that is appealing, we live in an era of global warming. When big trees sequester so much carbon, I think it is an unwise position to get rid of non-native trees."

Yost, the UCSC doctoral candidate, said the eucalyptus debate is more complex than good tree or bad tree. While eucalyptus is invasive in the Monterey Bay's foggy climate, the tree doesn't spread in much of landlocked California. Its flammability is comparable to native Chaparral shrubs, oak and pines, Yost said, but people use blue gum's non-native status as an excuse to get rid of them. Many city trees are non-native, she said.

"Living in cities is a hard thing for trees," Yost said. "They have to survive on little water, in tiny street wells, with little care. There are some great non-native trees that are capable of living like this and our cities benefit from using these trees."

The Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Commission has recommended adding the identification of eucalyptuses and acacias as a reason property owners can request removal of heritage trees. The City Council will review minor changes to the heritage tree ordinance during a 7 p.m. meeting Tuesday, but is expected to put off a decision on the non-native species.

Staff writer J.M. Brown contributed to this story.