

Cut 429 trees, report says

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1-28-88
SANTA CRUZ — Some 429 pitch canker-diseased Monterey pines, including 304 in the fishhook area where highways 1 and 17 meet, are recommended to be cut immediately.

The recommendation comes in a just-released report by the California Department of Forestry for the state Department of Transportation. Whether or not the cutting takes place this winter as recommended, however, depends on agreement between Caltrans and Santa Cruz County officials.

Also, Caltrans will begin cutting 78 dead pine trees Monday. Sixty-three of those trees are in the fishhook area. Work is expected to take two or three weeks, according to Caltrans Public Affairs Officer Lisa Murphy in San Francisco.

The new cutting comes in the wake of the removal of 62 dead trees last September. At that time, Caltrans backed off its original plan to cut 1,200 to 1,300 trees showing symptoms of the disease, and cut only those trees that were dead. Caltrans has moved forward on the cutting quickly since many of the dead or dying trees present safety hazards to motorists.

Work now in progress along the southbound Highway 1 off-ramp from Highway 17 is not related to the pine-killing disease. Seven large trees are being

cut this week to make room for the construction of a 200-foot-long barrier, said Caltrans' Assistant Resident Engineer Jerry Sommers. The monthlong, \$150,000 safety project will include minor widening and resurfacing of the off-ramp, as well.

The pitch canker disease has placed thousands of trees in the county in jeopardy since being detected in late 1986. Monterey pines — second in number locally only to redwoods — are the primary victim of the disease, which initially turns branch tips brown before spreading throughout the tree.

Forester Bill Ruskin, who drafted the so-called "siviculture" report, said immediate cutting of the 429 disease- and insect-ridden trees is necessary since most insects are in the dormant stage.

"There are developing, maturing insects inside those trees right now," he said. "If you wait until the warmer weather, those insects will hatch and really complicate matters."

However, Ruskin isn't overly optimistic about Caltrans' starting the work immediately since county officials have already asked that either an environmental impact report be conducted or a negative declaration be passed, which essentially agrees that the cutting would not affect the environment.

The county Transportation

Commission will discuss the matter next Thursday.

Ruskin concedes that an environmental impact report could delay the recommended cutting several months. Caltrans Senior Maintenance Engineer Jim Claypool has already said he doesn't expect work (as recommended in the new report) to take place until at least this spring.

Of the 429 trees recommended for cutting, 304 are near the fishhook, just west of the southbound Highway 1 on-ramp from Highway 17. Of those 304, nearly 200 were classified within the "dead" or "poor" (health) category, said Ruskin.

Hundreds of more trees — from alongside Highway 17 near the Pasatiempo exit to along Highway 1 at Bay Avenue in Capitola — are recommended to be pruned.

A replanting plan is also called for in the report, although Claypool conceded replanting is "governed by the budget."

"That means if re-landscaping proves to be really big, it would have to compete in the budget with other (highway) needs," he added.

The report looked at doing everything from removing all existing trees in certain locations to doing nothing.

Ruskin noted that 15,000 Monterey pines were originally planted in 1957 when the highways were built.