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Cutting of diseased trees to start next Monday

By ALEXANDRA HAYNE
STAFF WRITER

The 62 dead pine trees identified for removal from Caltrans land along Highway 1 in Santa Cruz County will start coming down Monday.

The trees were killed by pitch canker, a fungus disease that has affected thousands of pines — mostly Monterey pines — 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.

At first, Caltrans officials planned to cut down between 900 and 1,200 trees along the highway between Santa Cruz and Aptos. But after hearing from an expert in the disease, plant pathologist L. David Dwinell, the officials decided to cut down only the completely dead trees, most of which are located at the interchange of Highways 1 and 17 in Santa Cruz.

Dwinell, who has studied the disease for 10 years in Georgia, said the branch browning usually goes away and most trees recover by themselves.

Caltrans then met with county and city officials in May to outline its plans for cutting down the dead trees. Workers will have taken pictures and noise-level readings before Monday to compare with pictures and readings to be taken after the trees are cut.

At that point, Caltrans officials will meet with local officials again to discuss any replanting necessary to maintain comparable levels of noise and visual screening.

Scientists have said that part of the reason the Caltrans trees are so severely affected, however, is that they were planted too close together in the first place. Crowding weakens trees and makes them more susceptible to disease. Caltrans, in the second phase of its plan to care for the fungus-affected trees, will spend about six months developing a comprehensive plan for tree-planting on its land aimed at avoiding infestations such as this one.

"What we would do is look at what could go in there and survive," Greg Bayol, Caltrans district information officer, said today.

Bayol said it would take Caltrans about three weeks to cut down the 62 trees.

The Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission is scheduled to hear a report from Caltrans tomorrow at 9 a.m. in the fifth-floor supervisors chambers at the County Government Center.

In another pitch-canker matter, scientists were scheduled today to check on the progress of several experiments designed to test whether a fungicide-injection system works and how long after a tree is wounded it remains susceptible to infection.

Steve Tjosvold, farm adviser for University of California Extension in Watsonville, said he thought it was still too early to tell if an unusual injection system could stop the spread of the pitch canker or prevent reinfection. Five trees were injected with Fungisol in late March.

Scientists, including Tjosvold, have expressed skepticism in the method, based on what they have called faulty research techniques. Proponents of the method, most notably a plant pathologist under contract with the company that sells the product, say that the fungicide kills the fungus present in the tree when injected.

After the trees were injected in March, Tjosvold introduced the fungus into new wounds to see if the trees would resist infection.

"I haven't been out there for two or three weeks," Tjosvold said today. "There weren't any symptoms yet from the ones we innoculated last month. But with this warm weather, there might be something going on.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there's some disease out there."

Another experiment to begin today involves a special pruning paint developed by Dr. Art McCain, the plant pathologist at UC-Berkeley who first identified the Santa Cruz infection.

Tjosvold said run-of-the-mill pruning paint, which is put on the raw wood left exposed by pruning, does not stop the fungus from entering the wound. The fungus needs an open wound, caused by an insect, pruning, or the like, to enter and infect a tree.