

✓Diseased pine trees slated for removal

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SANTA CRUZ — More than 500 pitch canker-diseased Monterey pine trees along highways 1 and 17 will be cut, beginning as soon as two weeks.

The Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission gave preliminary approval to cutting one-third of the Monterey pines along a six-mile portion of the two highways. The proposed state Department of Transportation project was approved only after the commission got assurances

that a replanting plan would be included.

Not a single member of the public spoke during the hearing. The approval came as a surprise, of sorts, since Caltrans and county officials have been jousting for more than a year over what to do about the browning, dying trees.

The biggest area of concern, expressed by commission Chairman John Laird and former commission Chairman Joe Cucchiara, was lack

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Pine trees

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of adequate environmental review for such a large undertaking. Both said there would be increased noise and uglier views resulting from the cutting.

The need to act immediately was amplified by the fact the disease-ridden trees are also infected with now-dormant insects. Once warmer weather arrives, those insects will start hatching with the potential to spread the pine-killing disease to trees on private land, warned state officials.

Caltrans has moved forward quickly on the cutting since many of the dead or dying trees present safety hazards to motorists. There is no known cure for the fungus, which was detected locally in late 1986 and is widespread in the southeastern portion of the country.

Caltrans Deputy District Director Bob Graham said cutting could start "within two weeks," or as soon as the county approves Caltrans' written commitments surrounding the project.

He hopes the cutting might be completed by the beginning of April, at which time a replanting project could begin. The replanting could take until the end of the year.

While he could give no estimate as to the cost of the cutting or subsequent replanting, Graham said emergency funding is available for cutting, and state maintenance monies are available for replanting.

Graham told transportation commissioners there would be 520 trees felled. However, a check of the state Department of Forestry's sylviculture report, which Caltrans is using, recommended 537 trees be felled.

Those trees are located in the

state highway right-of-way between the Pasatiempo exit along Highway 17 through Santa Cruz to the Bay Avenue exit in Capitola. Nearly 200 of the trees are located near the fishhook where highways 1 and 17 intersect.

The 537 trees, which represents one-third of the estimated 1,500 trees within the six-mile segment, fall well short of Caltrans' original plan to cut 1,200 to 1,300 pines. The approved plan calls for cutting those trees rated in the "dead" or "poor" categories by service forester Bill Ruskin, who did the sylviculture study for the Department of Forestry.

While the Transportation Commission's approval was academic since Caltrans was not required to gain local approval before proceeding, Caltrans has attempted to keep local officials abreast of the situation and preferred to move forward with the blessing of the county.

Graham agreed to comply — by written confirmation within one week — with recommended mitigations by county Environmental Coordinator Susan Williamson.

Those included:

- Completion of a "visual study" after the removal to compare the effects of cutting.

- Replant one tree for every two removed unless there are technical reasons not to do so.

- Formation of a technical review committee to review Caltrans' replanting plan, and to see whether there are technical reasons for replanting at a density of less than one tree for every two removed.

- Completion of a sound study to ensure the cutting does not increase noise levels.

- Ensure the removal of cut trees by the preferred method of chipping

on site. If that is not possible, burning larger stumps in accordance with Air Pollution Control standards would be allowed.

Laird questioned comments by Graham, who said there would be "no significant change in the level of noise" from the cutting. "I find that surprising," said Laird.

Graham replied, "It is surprising, but trees actually are a very poor reducer of noise. It really requires a very solid wall made of timber or concrete. There is a psychological feeling with trees, but, in effect, the noise readings are not all that different with or without them."

Cucchiara was staunch in his opposition, citing lack of "written commitment" from Caltrans, as well as details regarding the replanting plan.

Upon urging by Commissioner Andy Schiffrin, Graham later agreed to the "written commitment" from Caltrans, based on Environmental Coordinator Williamson's concerns.

He said most of the infected material could be chipped on site and used for mulch. Chipping effectively kills both pitch canker and insects.

Graham said he hopes to finalize the replanting plan by April 1. He said the replanting plan would be based on local comment, saying it would be possible to plant fast-growing, temporary trees along with slower-growing, permanent evergreens.

The cutting of 537 trees is not directly related to the ongoing work around the Highway 1-Highway 17 fishhook. Cutting started on 78 dead trees Monday and will continue for another two or three weeks. That cutting comes in the wake of the removal of 62 dead trees last September.

trees