

Maine's Changing Treescapes Due to Insect Invasion

Our world is changing. That is nothing new. But the rate of change is faster than ever before. Big changes are coming to Maine's forests and urban treescapes. So says Tony Aman of Penobscot. He is an arborist who volunteers with the Forest Pest Outreach and Survey Project (FPOSP). Since 2009, the Maine Department of Agriculture, with assistance from the Maine Forest Service, has conducted training sessions on invasive forest insects through FPSOP. "Like a slow moving hurricane, we know it is coming because we see its effects to our south and west," he says.

The slow hurricane of change he describes is invasive insects that destroy trees, many kinds of trees and lots of them. The Maine Forest Service likens this threat to the near complete destruction of the American Chestnut Tree. This time, however, not just one species is targeted.

A host of hungry critters have destroyed millions of ash, hemlocks, and a variety of familiar deciduous trees like maple, willow, horse chestnut, and even our sorely afflicted elms. Some of these bugs attack only their namesake tree, like the Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) which only destroys the ash tree. With no native natural enemies, they feed and reproduce unchecked, resulting in extremely high tree mortality rates.

"I visited my hometown of Toledo, Ohio last year," Aman reports. "Ash trees used to thrive in the marshes along Lake Erie. Now, hundreds of standing dead ghosts of trees wait to be toppled by the next storm." EAB was detected in February of this year in New Hampshire just a few miles from the Maine border. Change is on its way.

Another hungry critter, the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid (HWA), is already in Maine. It first showed up in Virginia and has made its way to our southern coast. In 2003 HWA was detected in Kittery, 2004 in Wells, 2005 Eliot, and 2008 in Kennebunkport. The aphid-like insect is barely visible to the unaided eye. It is transported on the wind and by vehicles, on our clothing, and by birds and mammals.

"Most of these bugs are great hitchhikers," Aman laments. "We innocently spread them to new territory without even knowing it. Moving infested firewood is one of the worst causes of insect spread." As a consequence, Maine and most other states now ban the transport of firewood across state borders. The Maine Forest Service advises us to "Burn it where you buy it."

This insect invasion is an issue of importance for Blue Hill Heritage Trust and our conservation lands, as well as for landowners all over the Peninsula. The effects of these insects will hit close to home sooner or later. "Imagine Blue Hill with no ash, elm, or maple trees. Imagine the Trust's Peter's Brook Trail with no hemlocks," Aman says.

Fortunately, many other communities have been faced with this kind of specter and found ways to prepare and take action before, during, and after an infestation. In 2008, Worcester, Massachusetts was surprised by the Asian Longhorned Beetle (ALB), who had been munching undetected in its deciduous trees for ten years. A winter storm felled thousands of trees weakened by the bug, shutting down the city for days and costing millions of dollars. Then in

July of 2010 ALB was found near the Faulkner Hospital in Jamaica Plain. Because of early detection and quick action, only six trees were affected.

Every new detection of invasive tree insects has been because of alert citizen observation and reporting. Communities across Maine are holding informational meetings to inform the public about this issue. Blue Hill Heritage Trust will sponsor Part Two of a special presentation on the subject at the Blue Hill Library on Wednesday, July 31 from 7:00-8:30 p.m. Trust volunteer Tony Aman has invited Maine Forest Service entomologist Colleen Teerling to assist him in this discussion.

“I hope to bring this topic to the attention of folks who love our trees and hate wasting money on their destruction,” Aman says. “We might not stop a hurricane, but that does not prevent us from preparing for its arrival and the cleanup after.”

This program is free and open to the public. For more information, contact Blue Hill Heritage Trust at 374-5118 or info@bluehillheritagetrust.org, or Tony Aman at 326-4600.

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