

Local trees under siege: Arboreal threats closing in on region's forests

Trees in this region must feel they are under siege.

The emerald ash borer continues its eastward march after all but eliminating the ash-tree population in Essex County.

At the same time, forestry officials fight to keep the Asian long-horned beetle from breaking out of the Toronto area.

Both have the ability to devastate rural and urban forests, says Linda Tucker, a forest health technician with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources.

Speaking to a meeting of the Waterloo-Wellington Woodlot Association in Heidelberg Saturday, Tucker said insects, disease and weather are all taking a toll on trees in Waterloo Region and most of southern Ontario.

Forestry officials believe it is now a question of when, not if, the emerald ash borer reaches Waterloo Region.

The borer spread quickly after moving out of Michigan and into Essex but could slow down now that it has moved out of the Chatham-Kent area and has a more abundant supply of food.

"It could be five years, or for that matter it could already be here, but we don't think it is," Tucker said in an interview.

The emerald-ash borer isn't the only threat.

Beech bark disease and nut canker both have done extensive damage in places such as Steckles Woods in Kitchener.

Beech bark disease is fatal to beech trees. The butternut canker is a lethal disease caused by a fungi pathogen and is found just about anywhere in North America where butternut trees grow.

Tucker said there is no safe haven for these trees and the destruction has been so complete that butternut trees are now considered an endangered species. A national recovery team has been formed to develop a strategy to save the trees.

American elm trees, all but wiped out in the first wave of Dutch Elm Disease 30 years ago, are now facing the second wave of the disease.

Old trees thought to be resistant to the disease are now succumbing, Tucker said.

Even if trees survive disease and insects, there's always the weather.

The effects of extremely hot weather in June and July this year, along with drought-like conditions, will likely show up two or three years from now.

The tornado that whipped through this part of Ontario on Aug. 19 caused major blowdowns in Wellington and Mapleton townships.

Winds that reached more than 180 kilometres-per-hour caused major tree damage on the east side of Conestogo Lake and in the Elora-Fergus area.

Tucker said she tries to remain positive, although the threats to trees are many and varied.

"We are lucky in southern Ontario to have a long growing season and diverse soil types and topography, so we have an area that supports a high variety of tree species," she said.

"We are going to lose some species probably, but we have so many others to choose from."

If such an invasion occurred in northern forests, the impact would be huge, she said.

"There are so few species up there."

Tucker said there are a lot of "critters and insects" moving tree seeds around and the push for restoration is getting stronger.

"We are going to be dealing with some hardships, but these hardships prepare us for the future," she said.

And the future will include forests, Tucker added.

"We have more now than we did back in the 20s and 30s when a lot of woodlots were clearcut."

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