



Position statement: Tree pests and diseases

September 2011

Background

Pests and diseases affecting trees, woods and forests are not new. However, in recent years the trend has been for an increased frequency in the detection of new and serious tree pests and diseases in the UK. Contributing factors are thought to be:

- **Climate change:** With a trend towards warmer and wetter weather, pests and disease previously excluded or contained by our climatic conditions may be more likely to expand, e.g. the horse chestnut leaf miner. Equally, some native organisms may also respond to changing climatic conditions and become damaging to their hosts, or even invade new ones; this is thought to be the case with the bacteria causing symptoms in Acute Oak Decline. The stress on individual trees caused by climate change could also be a contributory factor to vulnerability to disease.
- **Increasing global plant trade:** The love which Britons have for their parks and gardens shows little sign of diminishing. Between 2000 and 2008 the value of imported plants rose from £197m to £340m. Imports represent a major route for diseases including *Phytophthora ramorum* (Sudden Oak Death) and oak processionary moth into the UK.
- **Increasing global trade in wood products and packaging:** Britain uses a large amount of timber, paper, boards and other wood products each year, about 80 per cent of this has to be imported. Around 85 per cent of our non-wood imports are accompanied by wood packaging material.

Why are the UK's woods vulnerable to disease?

Little remains of Britain's ancient woodland. It covers just 2 per cent of the UK land area and the native woodland resource is highly fragmented and dominated by a few key tree species. Native woodlands are therefore particularly vulnerable to the threat of non-native pests and new diseases.

The majority of Britain's conifer plantations consist of exotic species introduced in the 19th century. In most cases their natural pests/disease are largely absent from Britain and consequently the natural biological controls/checks may also be absent. Non-native conifer dominates on Planted Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS).

Regulation of plant health in the UK

Protecting plant health in the UK is a shared responsibility between government, growers, traders and the general public. Responsibility for protection of forest trees and timber from attack by pests is delegated to the Forestry Commission Plant Health Service.

To prevent the introduction of new plant pests and control the spread of existing pests, the Forestry Commission:

- Inspects shipments of timber and timber products arriving from countries outside the EU
- Maintains a register of GB traders moving timber and timber products within the EU
- Carries out national surveys of forests to ensure that no new pests have been introduced and to establish the extent or spread of pests here
- Places controls on the movement of timber and timber products from infested areas to non-infested areas within the EU

The Forestry Commission published a Tree Health Strategy¹ for the UK in 2011.

Impacts of tree pests and diseases

Details of the main pests and diseases of current concern are kept up to date on the Forestry Commission's [plant health website](#)².

Of particular note is *Phytophthora ramorum* (*P. ramorum*), a fungus-like pathogen. It initially infected shrubs such as rhododendron and bilberry, but *P. ramorum* has now infected Japanese larch. Its foliage produces *P. ramorum* spores at about five times the level that rhododendron does, and these can be dispersed over considerable distances. The pathogen thrives and spreads best in a moist, mild climate along the southern and western seabords of Britain.

P. ramorum has been declared a notifiable plant disease under the 2005 Plant Health Act which means landowners with infected trees and shrub must comply with any recommendation or works required. This involves felling infected trees.

P. ramorum raises a number of concerns for the Woodland Trust, particularly where felling is taking place in Planted Ancient Woodland Sites:

- The Woodland Trust's preferred approach in such sites would be gradual restoration through continuous cover management, but the seriousness of the disease means landowners often need to clearfell, which could jeopardise the recovery of sensitive ancient woodland communities of plants and animals
- Currently there is no requirement to restock, which could mean a net loss of forest cover in the UK, and in the case of PAWS, a permanent loss of ancient woodland.

Other conditions causing concern include Acute Oak Decline, which has been found affecting hundreds of trees across central and south east England, and parts of Wales, and can kill trees within four to five years. Forest Research believe a previously unknown bacterium may be responsible.

Horse chestnut bleeding canker has been affecting increasing numbers of horse chestnut trees in recent years. Bleeding cankers are lesions that ooze or "bleed" liquid from the trunks or branches of trees. In the case of horse chestnut, some trees eventually die, some recover, and others have to be felled for safety reasons because the condition weakens the trunks or branches until they are in danger of falling.

The Westminster Government has made it clear that cost for disease outbreaks will need to be met by the landowners affected. This could lead to a corresponding decrease in private sector funds being available for programmes aimed at biodiversity, woodland creation, and improving access in woodland.

The Woodland Trust's view

The Woodland Trust is a significant woodland owner, but also lobbies for protection and enhancement of woodland, especially native woodland, in the UK. As such, we are concerned about pests and diseases that threaten the survival or health and ecological functioning of woodland and we believe concerted action should be taken to prevent the arrival and establishment of species that are likely to threaten our woodland biodiversity.

We are also concerned that the perception of risk around tree diseases could lead to a reduction in tree planting, and could lead to landowners closing their woods to the public.

What the Trust will do

We will:

- continue to lobby for adequate funding for research into existing and new pests and diseases that significantly threaten the survival, health and ecological functioning of trees and woodland.
- continue to lobby for any policy and incentive changes needed to ensure an increase in tree diseases and pests does not adversely impact on programmes such as woodland creation, PAWS restoration, and improvements to woodland access.
- support the Forestry Commission's Biosecurity Programme to protect the health of trees and woods in the UK, acting in particular as the champion of native trees and woods
- work with others across the forestry and woodland sector to champion the cause of native trees and woods, and the forestry sector more widely in the face of increasing threats from tree diseases and pests
- continue to lobby for tighter regulations on movements of timber, timber products and plant stock to prevent import of new pests and diseases
- support the biosecurity measures produced by the Forestry Commission and comply with biosecurity requirements on our own estate. We have produced a protocol to be followed by all staff in relation to *Phytophthora ramorum*
- encourage its members to follow advice for the public designed to reduce the spread of pests and diseases.

References

¹ [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/TreehealthStrategyMinisters.pdf/\\$FILE/TreehealthStrategyMinisters.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/TreehealthStrategyMinisters.pdf/$FILE/TreehealthStrategyMinisters.pdf)

² <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-6abl5v>