

Position Statement

Tree pests and diseases

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WOODLAND
TRUST

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Tree Pests and Diseases

The Trust's view:

- Pests and diseases new to the UK that affect trees and woods have increased dramatically in recent years
- While disease and decay are a natural part of ecosystems, this unprecedented increase has been accelerated by human activity. Coupled with climate change and other land use pressures, this poses a severe threat to the survival, health and ecological functioning of trees and woodland, and the species they support
- Concerted action is needed by Government, its agencies, and the forestry, horticultural and conservation sectors to tackle these issues, and to build resilience in our woods
- Control of plant imports and other pathways for the entry of harmful pests and diseases must be tightened to reduce the risk of them arriving and becoming established in the UK
- More funding must be provided for appropriate research, surveillance, monitoring, control and mitigation measures to tackle those that are already here, and to be better prepared for new threats.



Effects of acute oak decline

The Trust will:

- Use only planting stock of UK provenance, from seed collected, raised and grown only in the UK.
- Encourage visitors to our properties to follow government advice designed to prevent spread of tree pests and disease.
- Support biosecurity measures devised by the Forestry Commission and comply with such biosecurity requirements as required on our own estate.
- Work with others across the relevant sectors to champion the cause of native woodland and trees in the face of increasing threats from tree diseases and pests.
- Continue to lobby for more investment in:
 - Revision of legislation and policy where this will result in reduced risk of importing infected materials and other potential infection and infestation pathways into the UK
 - Increased investment in research to understand new pests and diseases and their causes, especially where these potentially have high impact on the UK's tree and forest resource
 - More money for agencies to survey for and detect tree pests and disease in the wider countryside, and enable them to respond quickly before issues get out of hand
 - Clear advice for landowners and managers to deal with outbreaks of pests and disease

Tree pests and diseases

Disease, decay and death are part of natural processes in woods and other treescapes. Ancient and veteran trees containing large amounts of dead and decaying wood, are a rich habitat for many other species, and deadwood within woods makes a major contribution to their biodiversity. Native trees have co-evolved with pests and diseases, forming part of a balanced ecosystem. However, in recent years we have seen an increase in new and serious pests and diseases, some of which threaten the survival, health or ecological functioning of our trees and woods.

Contributing factors are thought to be:

- Climate change: changing conditions may be more favourable to organisms that damage trees, and may also make trees more vulnerable eg through drought stress
- Increased global plant trade: the value of imported plants rose from £197m to £340m between 2000 and 2008. Imports of plants and associated materials present a major risk of introducing disease.
- Increased global trade in wood products and packaging: around 80 per cent of our wood products are imported, and 85 per cent of non-wood products include wood packaging

Across the countryside, the fragmentation of our native and ancient woods, which are often dominated by a few key species, makes them vulnerable. Commercial plantations of exotic species are also at risk, especially if planted in monocultures.

Current major threats include ash dieback caused by the fungus *Chalara fraxinea*, widespread death of larch caused by *Phytophthora ramorum*, acute oak decline affecting trees across central and southern England and caused by a previously unknown bacterium, *Dothistroma* needle blight affecting pine, including native Scots pine, and *Phytophthora austrocedrae*, which has been found in key populations of native juniper, one of our rarest trees. Oak processionary moth affects trees, but can also be harmful to human health. Other pests like Emerald Ash Borer are not yet in the UK, but could arrive soon and could devastate our trees.

The Woodland Trust's view

Increasing numbers of pests and diseases threaten the UK's tree and woodland resource. Losses from ash dieback could reach the proportions of Dutch elm disease – ash is our third most common tree and supports a wide variety of other species. *Phytophthora ramorum* has led to extensive felling of larch, with severe consequences for the commercial forestry sector. On Planted Ancient Woodland Sites, where gradual restoration is recommended, such clear felling could damage ancient woodland ecology. Efforts to conserve and expand juniper, already under pressure, are severely hampered by disease, and the threat of disease could also discourage woodland creation.

Current systems to prevent introduction of disease are not working, despite the introduction of a Tree Health Strategy in 2011. Reductions in both Forestry Commission and Forest Research budgets since then may have reduced their capability. The Woodland Trust believes the Government needs to take concerted action on this issue, supported by its agencies and the forestry and conservation sectors.

The Trust will act on its own estate to minimise the risk of disease transmission. This will mean planting only stock that can be guaranteed to be from UK collected seed, sourced and grown in the UK. We will follow biosecurity guidance and protocols, and encourage members and visitors to act responsibly to minimise risk of spreading disease. We will work in partnership with others to champion the cause of trees and woods, raising awareness of the possible impacts and developing initiatives to counter them. We will also continue to lobby for changes in policy and legislation that could reduce the risk of disease entering the UK, and for more resources for research, surveillance, monitoring, control and mitigation of the impacts of pests and disease.