

Ash: safety vs nature

by **Simon Walls**, Euroforest

As ash dieback becomes more visible in the landscape it moves from a forestry or arboricultural problem, to one which has the potential to impact on all landowners and indeed anyone who uses woodland for recreational purposes or the public highway network to travel.

The physiological properties of ash are such that in death a tree will rapidly lose structural integrity and could create a significant hazard within 2-3 years. In a tree with ash dieback the situation is made worse because death does not occur over one season and often will initially go unnoticed, the result being that by the time a tree is identified as being affected, the crown is already in a state where branch loss is a reality. The advice offered by DEFRA against pre-emptive felling of ash has potentially created a situation where many trees at roadsides or in other areas of high public pressure are now in a condition where only rapid intervention can prevent serious injury or loss of life.

Any science on the subject is hard to access but; travel any section of wooded road and where safe look up into the crowns and you will likely find yourself under dead and dying ash trees – it is very likely that the current landscape along many sections of road, in forests and other amenity areas will



be changed significantly in the next few years. The bigger question for many landowners and operational foresters is how do we do that safely without risk to operators and before someone is seriously hurt or killed by falling branches or trees.

Balancing objectives

The potential for ash dieback to rapidly change our rural landscape and habitat cannot be underestimated. The problem with the DEFRA advice is that it has created a sense of security in implying that

we have time, whereas in reality what has been achieved is to condense the felling of diseased ash into a shorter time period and which undoubtedly will have a greater impact on both visual and ecological landscapes. Additionally, this will also require the deployment of a larger resource to deal with the problem and in doing so spreads the necessary skills very thinly.

For many people, the increased levels of deadwood in our forests will be viewed as a positive benefit, increasing the availability of habitat for bats, birds and invertebrates, >>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Good practice around how to deal with ash dieback would suggest that a zoned approach, in line with the general tree safety management advice offered by the National Tree Safety Group and the Forestry Commission, would offer a balance between due diligence, environmental benefit and financial objectives.

The primary focus for any land owner must be to remove or make safe any ash which is showing signs of disease and is within falling distance of roads, paths, railway lines or any other area frequented by people. Additional consideration should be given on how any operation can be mechanised, reducing operator exposure to a minimum; the use of harvesting machinery where operators are protected from falling branches and tops by a cab, offers the highest levels of risk control.

Additionally, the use of shears on a long reach boom may also provide opportunities for crown reduction where trees are of a size that otherwise necessitates manual felling, one further benefit of this technique is that large stems could be retained

as safe standing deadwood ie crowns removed to a height which presents limited risk to people accessing the land.

The second priority would be to address the area zoned as having potential for access or a known low level of access, in these areas there is more potential to retain a proportion of diseased trees but again the focus should be to consider desire lines and known points of access, these could include for example, bird pens and shooters pegs on sporting estates where there is no public access or any other point where people could be stationary for any period.

Finally, very remote areas where public access is difficult or unlikely could be left for natural processes to take place and for decay to occur.

Most importantly we must acknowledge that doing nothing is not an option, landowners and agents must recognise their wider duty of care and operational managers must make every effort to protect operators they engage to address the problem.



>> however we must ensure that this additional standing deadwood is reserved for areas with low public pressure and low risk. It would be difficult to advise a landowner to do nothing and let trees decay naturally when any level of public access is likely.

Experience from Denmark suggests the situation is further complicated by the fact that a primary infection of ash dieback renders the tree more susceptible to attack from other pathogens, in particular from *Armillaria* which causes the rooting structure to decay and thus the benefits provided by standing deadwood are short-lived at best. Conversely, Polish foresters claim that *Armillaria* is not a problem but that ash dieback itself causes a rapid decay of rooting however the result is essentially the same.

The challenge then is how best to balance a range of objectives; a land owner has a duty of care to anyone accessing their land or who could be affected by trees or parts of trees falling from their land on to adjacent land accessed by others. Most landowners will also have a primary objective of realising the financial potential of their undertaking and also are likely to have an interest in the wider environmental benefits of their management. Importantly, financial returns from ash will be compromised as the disease progresses and timber quality deteriorates and the volume of ash being marketed increases.

Improving environmental protection in forestry

by **Stuart Wilkie**

The Forest Industry Environment Group (FIEG) came together following discussions between various individuals across the state and private forestry sector in Scotland. There appeared to be several areas of environmental interest where working together seemed to offer advantages. We found that we had common goals but also common problems, particularly in seeking compliance with regulatory, UKFS and UKWAS requirements.

The FIEG is not a formally constituted body, and is currently made up of representatives from Confor, Forestry Commission Scotland, Forest Enterprise Scotland, Scottish Woodlands and Tilhill. We hope we can draw in the experience, skills and time of other organisations, companies and individuals in the future, including from outside Scotland. If you would like to be involved or if you have suggestions for issues that should be tackled in the future, please let us know.

At the most practical level the objective of the group is to promote common standards so that everyone working in the sector receives consistent message from site to

site, and also to help interpret legislation and guidance, and distil this down to sensible workable advice.

As a first step the group felt it was useful to establish a framework of roles and responsibilities. This would also give a consistent reference for future guidance and operational management. Rather than reinvent the wheel, it seemed obvious to adopt the familiar roles described in FISA's Guidance on Managing Health and Safety in Forestry, and simply define environmental responsibilities for those roles. Thus, the idea of Guidance on Responsibilities for Environmental Protection in Forestry was born with the aim that it could become an accepted industry wide standard.

The first draft of the proposed guide is published on the Confor website as a consultation exercise. The group would welcome your thoughts and comments, with a view to producing a final draft in the spring of 2019. Please send your comments to stuart.wilkie@scottishwoodlands.co.uk by 15 January.

www.confor.org.uk/resources/consultations

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Confor and HTA demand action on *Xylella fastidiosa*

The discovery of *Xylella fastidiosa* in two more sites (one in Belgium and one in the Netherlands) has significantly increased the risk of it reaching our shores. The scenes of devastated Olive groves in Spain and Italy have attracted the headlines, but the disease can also infect woody plants such as Lavender, Bay and several species of broadleaf trees widely grown in the UK.

If *Xylella* were to spread to the UK, control would focus on the targeted removal of host plants and management of the vector insects' habitats. The challenge for any nursery in the UK found to have imported an infected plant, is that they would be likely to face tight quarantine regulations on the rest of their trade. Defra has recently issued guidance for the nursery and plant importing industries that includes details of the control measures which would be taken if the disease were found in the UK.

Confor's Nursery Producers Group has

been working closely with Alistair Yeoman of the HTA, to produce a joint letter to Nicola Spence the Chief Plant Health Officer for the UK. The letter requests that high risk plants are tested for *Xylella* before being imported into the UK.

For the future biosecurity of our tree and shrub nurseries it is essential that this disease is kept out of the UK. Confor has been pushing the Government hard on a number of plant health issues.

www.confor.org.uk/news/plant-health

