DNR advises caution to prevent spread of oak wilt disease

Michigan DNR sent this bulletin at 04/06/2016 09:35 AM EDT

Statewide DNR News

April 6, 2016

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DNR advises caution to prevent spread of oak wilt disease

For most people, April 15 is the annual tax-filing deadline. For people like Roger Mech – and other forest health professionals – April 15 also marks the beginning of the yearly window when oak wilt can be transmitted from diseased to healthy red oak trees.

According to Mech, forest health specialist for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources Forest Resources Division, oak wilt is a serious disease of oak trees. It mainly affects red oaks, including northern red oak, black oak and pin oak. Red oaks often die within a few weeks after becoming infected. White oaks are more resistant; therefore, the disease progresses more slowly.

"The normal time-tested advice is to prevent oak wilt by not pruning or otherwise 'injuring' oaks from April 15 to July 15," Mech said.

He added that the spread of oak wilt occurs during this time of year as beetles move spores from fungal fruiting structures on the trees killed last year by oak wilt to wounds on healthy oaks. As warmer weather melts away snow and ice, the beetles that move oak wilt become active.

Unfortunately, many people learn not to prune or otherwise wound trees from mid-April to mid-July only after they lose their oaks to oak wilt, he said.

"It doesn't matter how cold the winter; it only takes a few 50-degree or warmer days for both the beetles and fungus to become active."

Although oak wilt hasn't been detected in every Michigan county, Mech said the need for vigilance is present statewide.

Spring is a popular time for people to move firewood to vacation properties and other locations. During this April-to-July period, Mech said it's vital not to move wood from oak wilt-killed trees. These trees often are cut into firewood and moved, sometimes many miles from their original locations. Any wounding of oaks in this new location can result in new oak wilt infections as

beetles move spores from the diseased firewood to fresh wounds on otherwise healthy trees.

"With the transport of firewood and other tree-related activities, you have to assume the risk is present, whether you live in metro Detroit or in the Upper Peninsula," Mech said.

The DNR recommends that anyone who suspects they have oak wilt-tainted firewood should cover it with a plastic tarp all the way to the ground, leaving no openings. This keeps the beetles away and generates heat inside the tarp, helping to destroy the fungus. Once the bark loosens on the firewood, the disease can no longer be spread.

New oak wilt sites have been traced to spring and early summer wounding from tree-climbing spikes, rights-of-way pruning, nailing signs on trees and accidental tree-barking (a wound created when bark is removed via impact from equipment, falling trees and other causes). If an oak is wounded during this critical time, the DNR advises residents to cover the wound immediately with either a tree-wound paint or a latex paint to help keep beetles away.

Once an oak is infected, the fungus moves to neighboring red oaks through root grafts. Oaks within approximately 100 feet of each other – depending on the size of the trees – have connected or grafted root systems. Left untreated, oak wilt will continue to move from tree to tree, progressively killing more red oak over an increasingly larger area.

As more trees die from oak wilt, more spores are produced which contribute to the overland spread of oak wilt.

To minimize the risk of oak wilt infection caused by logging damage, DNR prohibits cutting of red oak trees on state-managed land between April 15 and July 15. This helps protect red oak trees left after thinning from damage that could lead to infection.

The DNR recommends private forest landowners exercise caution during this period and, whenever possible, delay harvesting activity in oak forests until after July 15 to reduce the risk of oak wilt.

Visit the DNR website for more information on the background, symptoms and prevention of oak wilt, or visithttp://na.fs.fed.us/pubs/howtos/ht_oakwilt/identify_prevent_and_control_oak_wilt_print.pdf.

To report a suspected oak wilt site, email DNR-FRD-Forest-Health@michigan.gov or call 517-284-5895.

Learn more about oak wilt and other forest health issues in Michigan atwww.michigan.gov/foresthealth.

/**Note to editors:** A map illustrating the status of oak wilt in 2015 is available for download below./

- Oak wilt map 2015.jpg

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You Tube

News Release

Release Date: Immediate

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Oak Wilt Prevention – It's up to you and me!

Oak wilt, a non-native vascular wilt fungus that is fatal to red oaks, is present and spreading in Northern Michigan. Symptoms of oak wilt include the rapid loss of leaves, typically in mid-summer, and the slow progression from infected red oaks to adjacent healthy red oaks from one year to the next. Oak wilt once established spreads underground through the interconnected root systems of red oak trees. New infections can also begin when beetles spread spores from infected trees to healthy trees that are pruned or injured during the spring and early summer. A newly infected tree will lose all of its leaves in mid-summer.

To help prevent new infections, property owners should refrain from doing any oak removal or pruning between April 15th and July 15th, when beetles move spores from trees killed last year. The Nitidulid "picnic" beetles will pick up fungal spores and transfer them onto a freshly cut oak 1 to 1 ½ miles away. It is critical to not injure any oaks or create any way for the fungus to enter the vascular system of the healthy tree during this time. In addition, it is important not to move any firewood from trees that have been killed by oak wilt because this can also transport the disease to unaffected areas.

Leelanau County had its third confirmed oak wilt site last summer and treatment practices are working toward containing the spread. Two are located in Bingham Township and one in Leland Township. Other surrounding counties have been battling oak wilt since the 1980s, but vigilance is needed everywhere to keep loses from oak wilt to a minimum.

Residential treatment applications can be confounded by underground infrastructure, driveways, walks, gardens, property lines, and many other factors. However, high value residential oaks may be treated with an injected registered chemical that protects individual trees. The treatment needs to be repeated every two years. For homeowners, the injection costs for yard trees might be a viable option. Prevention is far cheaper but not always possible, as nature has a role. Recently, a Michigan Invasive Species Grant through the Department of Natural Resources was awarded the Forestry Assistance Program covering ten northwest Michigan Counties, including Leelanau, Benzie and Grant Traverse. Cost-share will become available to help private landowner control oak wilt.

Oak wilt is here to stay in Michigan. Human activity will most likely move the disease into previously affected stands as time goes on, however, oak wilt can be successfully managed and the oak forest resource will remain a part of our forested landscape.

The DNR and Conservation District Foresters are trying to confirm and document the extent of oak wilt in Michigan. If you would like more information, or suspect you may have oak wilt and would like it confirmed contact the Michigan DNR Forest Health Program at (517) 284-5895 or DNR-FRD-Forest-Health@michigan.gov or the Leelanau, Grand Traverse and Benzie Conservation District Forester, Kama Ross, at (231) 256-9783 or kama.ross@macd.org.

Oak Wilt Pest Alert: https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdard/OakWilt_3-14_453040_7.pdf

Oak Wilt Reminder!

To help prevent new infections, property owners should refrain from doing any oak removal or pruning of oaks between April 15th and July 15th, when the beetles that move fungal spores are most active. The Nitidulid "picnic" beetles will pick up fungal spores and transfer them onto a freshly cut oak 1 to 1 ½ miles away. It is critical to not injure any oaks or create any way for the fungus to enter the vascular system of the healthy tree during this time. A newly infected tree will lose all of its leaves in mid-summer. In addition, it is important not to move any firewood from trees that have been killed by oak wilt because this can also transport the disease to unaffected areas.

Residents with any concerns or questions about oak wilt are encouraged to contact District Forester Kama Ross for further assistance, 231-256-9783 or kama.ross@macd.org.

District Forester Provides Free Landowner Assistance

The Leelanau, Benzie, and Grand Traverse Conservation Districts offer landowner assistance through the Forestry Assistance Program (FAP). District Forester Kama Ross's role is to encourage and enable landowners to more actively manage their woodlands. This position is funded by a grant from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. In-office and on-site assistance is provided to all county landowners at no charge and may include:

- identification of forest diseases and insects and their control options,
- advice on the selection and planting of trees and shrubs for reforestation, windbreaks, and wildlife habitat enhancement,
- information on state and federal forestry cost-share and tax incentive programs, and
- recommendations for improving woodlots for timber production, wildlife habitat or recreation. Referrals to qualified forestry consultants, industry foresters and other natural resource professionals help landowners take the next step in implementing sound forest management practices.

To find out more about these free services, contact Kama at (231) 256-9783, or email her at kama.ross@macd.org.