

ASH DIE BACK

Purpose

To inform members of the most recent assessment of the Ash Die Back disease and effects on the Wye Valley.

FOR INFORMATION

Key Issues

- Ash trees are the UK's third most common tree and an important tree in woodlands and hedgerows in the Wye Valley.
- The future of Ash is threatened by ash dieback; a disease caused by a fungus which is fatal in about 85% of Ash trees.
- 2019 was the first year when Ash Die Back was observed significantly widespread throughout the Wye Valley.
- It is the most significant tree disease to hit the UK since Dutch Elm disease in the 1970s.
- Ash Die Back will have a substantial impact on the landscape and wildlife, exacerbated by the current climate and ecological emergencies.
- Landowners need to evaluate the social, economic and environmental risks of dead or dying Ash trees, particularly along roadside and publicly accessible places.
- The impact of the disease is likely to become more obvious in 2020, both through the prevalence of dead or diseased trees in the landscape and the visibility of the removal of high risk trees in well-frequented places.

Reasons

Ash is the third most common native broadleaved tree species in Great Britain after oak and birch. Ash trees provide habitat for over 1000 species. The Wye Valley and Forest of Dean is one of the important areas for Ash trees in Britain. Approximately 30% of the Wye Valley Woodlands Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) is Ash dominated woodland.

Last year was the first year when symptoms of Ash Die Back could be observed across many sites in the Wye Valley. Although the disease had been observed in previous years, its impacts had appeared to be low level compared to other parts of the UK and Europe. As the 2019 summer progressed, dieback in the crown of Ash trees was observed in most Wye Valley woodlands, including all Forestry England sites, with the extent of Die Back varying from slight to 50% or more with a corresponding increase in the levels of dead wood in the crowns.

Experience from elsewhere has highlighted particular dangers from falling branches and trees, due to fragile crowns and hidden rot in the base of infected Ash trees. Thus, Health and Safety is a primary concern for landowners when considering management of the disease. However, pre-emptive, wide-scale felling of ash trees in woodland should be avoided wherever possible and could be detrimental to the long-term recovery of Ash. This is because there is potential for tolerant trees to exist and for some trees to recover from disease and/or to produce seed which could form the next generation of Ash with more tolerance to the disease. Therefore, as a core principle, infected Ash trees should be left standing except where there is a material safety risk.

Implications

The rate of progression of the disease has signalled the need for a more pro-active response from landowners and land managers where there is a heightened risk to public safety. The following zoning approach is being used as a guide by many woodland owners and managers to identify the areas of Ash that pose the greatest potential threat:

Major roads (based on both speed and usage)	High Risk
Car parks, minor roads, permanently occupied sites such as housing, high-use public /recreational facilities and major public rights of way such as national or promoted trails.	Medium Risk
Public rights of way that have medium or low usage and permissive paths.	Low Risk
Areas with no defined footpaths or bridleways but public access.	Very Low Risk

Forestry England, Natural Resources Wales, the local highway authorities and other owners of publicly accessible trees and woodland, such as The Woodland Trust and the Wildlife Trusts, are drawing up Ash Die Back plans. Experience from elsewhere has also identified a risk to those manually felling dead or diseased Ash trees. Consequently, for example, Forestry England intend to initiate a programme of Ash tree removal using machine-based harvesting equipment so as to minimise the risks to felling operators. Their programme of felling work is likely to start later this summer. Where appropriate, trees that have been felled will either be replaced or natural regeneration of Ash & other species may be encouraged.

In recognition of the rate at which the disease can proceed, tree safety inspection frequencies of Ash in the higher risk areas should be increased and ideally be timed to allow an assessment of the rate of progress of crown die-back. For Forestry England, where the risks to public safety posed by affected Ash trees is judged to be lower, management will be undertaken as part of ongoing woodland management. In those areas where the risk to public safety is greatest Ash trees whose crowns have declined by 25-50% or more will be incorporated into the removal programme. Where significant costs related to highway management and road closures are anticipated, all Ash trees will be removed in a single operation to minimise ongoing management costs. This approach is also being considered by Monmouthshire and Gloucestershire County Councils at specific sites, such as at Old Station Tintern.

While the road closures and felling work may cause some local disruption, the subsequent loss of significant numbers of road-side trees will have a substantial impact on the character of the landscape and be detrimental to ecological connectivity.

The local response to the situation reflects the national guidance (see below) which continues to be reviewed in the light of ongoing experience.

The majority of woodlands in the Wye Valley retain a diverse mix of tree species and age structures and these factors enhance the area's resilience. Natural regeneration should lead to some emergence of natural tolerance and/or resistance. However other factors, such as the current high levels of deer browsing preventing regeneration and the damage to older trees by grey squirrels, have the potential to leave the landscape predominantly without ash trees for about 100 years. There are a number of other diseases of other tree species which are likely to compound the impact on woodland composition and structure which could also be significant over time. This is likely to be exacerbated by the impact of climate change on tree health and species selection.

It should also be noted that replanting as mitigation for Ash Die Back cannot be counted as tree-planting for climate change mitigation. However 'the right tree in the right place' is still the overriding principle for any mitigating planting in order to conserve and enhance local ecology and landscape character.

Background

The woods of the lower Wye Valley are one of the 'Special Qualities' of the AONB, recognised in the AONB Management Plan, and form one of the most important areas for woodland conservation in the UK. Nearly 2000 acres (916 hectares) of Wye Valley Woodland are of international importance identified as a Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) under the European Habitats Directive. The Wye Valley Woodlands SAC comprises fourteen sites within the almost continuously wooded environment of the lower Wye Valley, straddling 18 miles of the River Wye. These woodlands are a complex mosaic of native woodland types including Ash dominated woodland and Oak, Lime, Yew and Beech.

For further information on Ash Die Back see:

<https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/tools-and-resources/pest-and-disease-resources/ash-dieback-hymenoscyphus-fraxineus/>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ash-tree-research-strategy-2019>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-ash-trees-affected-by-ash-dieback-operations-note-46a>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-ash-in-woodlands-in-light-of-ash-dieback-operations-note-46>

<https://www.treecouncil.org.uk/What-We-Do/Ash-Dieback>

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/media/46523/managing-ash-dieback-on-woodland-trust-sites.pdf>

<https://www.gloucestershirenature.org.uk/forum/nature-recovery/ash-dieback-position-statement>