worcestershire countycouncil

AGENDA ITEM 8

MALVERN HILLS AONB JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE 18 NOVEMBER 2016

ASH DIEBACK DISEASE IN THE MALVERN HILLS AONB

Background

1. The following AONB Management Plan policies are relevant to this work:

    a. LP3 – Identify and promote opportunities for positive landscape change to landowners, managers, government and all those with an influence over land.
    b. FP5 Support appropriate measures to monitor and control pests, diseases and invasive non-native plant and animal species that damage biodiversity.

2. Chalara dieback of ash, also known as Chalara or ash dieback, is a disease of ash trees caused by a fungus called *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*. (The fungus was previously called *Chalara fraxinea*, hence the name of the disease). Chalara causes leaf loss, crown dieback and bark lesions in affected trees. Once a tree is infected the disease is usually fatal, either directly or indirectly by weakening the tree to the point where it succumbs more readily to attacks by other pests or pathogens, especially Armillaria fungi (honey fungus).

3. The first signs of Chalara in Britain were reported to be from a nursery in Buckinghamshire in February 2012, although it has recently been shown that the fungus has been present in the country for a longer period of time. Recent figures from the Forestry Commission indicate that the disease has now been formally identified and recorded in over 50% of 10km2 grid squares in England. Practitioners believe that the real incidence of the disease is likely to be much higher and is now endemic, with the current figure simply being down to lack of informed monitoring on the ground.

4. Chalara arrived in the UK from continental Europe where the disease has been active over a longer time period. European countries that have had the disease since 1992 have experienced a 95-98% mortality of common ash (Fraxinus excelsior) which is the native ash tree in the UK. Other Fraxinus species are also affected to similar or lesser extents. There is no current evidence to contradict the thought that the impact will be similar in the UK. Estimates vary but some sources put the number of ash trees in England at over 2.5billion with an estimate of over 50% of these falling outside of woodland situations. The disease can lead to the death of young ash trees within one growing season, but may take longer to affect mature trees. However, even in more mature trees decline from apparent full health to death can happen within just a couple of growing seasons. The eastern and south eastern counties of England and Devon have been the first to be particularly hit by the disease. A number of local authorities have now scoped the problem and started to put plans in place for dealing with it. Kent County Council, for example, is dealing with the disease as a plant health emergency under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. In Suffolk a recent

recognition of the scale of the disease has led to a doubling of the highways budget for managing trees and a commitment to allocate reserve funds to this to assist in management over the next 5 years. Local Authority estimates for the cost of dealing with the immediate impacts of Chalara vary from about £300 to £1500 per highway side tree. The current average estimate is of 40,000 highway impacting trees per highway authority.

Ash and the Malvern Hills AONB

5. There is no estimate on the number of ash trees in the Malvern Hills AONB but we do know that the number will be high. Ash forms a significant component of many woodlands in the AONB, especially in the west of the area. Locally, ash may account for 80% or more of more recent woods and copses but even in some more established broadleaved woods it is likely to account for 30-40%. In addition, ash trees are common in many hedgerows and in some fields and wood pasture across the area, often as mature or veteran trees where they play a very significant role in supporting biodiversity and contributing to landscape character.

6. Landowners and many public bodies will rightly be focussed on the practical and financial implications of dealing with ash dieback, assuming it becomes prevalent in this part of the country. A key preoccupation of the AONB Partnership should be the potential impact it will have on the natural beauty of the area and on the development of a plan for how this might be mitigated. Whilst the impact of the disease in a woodland could be very marked, other tree species will, over time, replace ash and some species of wildlife will probably benefit from the changes which are brought about in these dynamic habitats. However, the landscape impact on other, non-wooded landscapes in the AONB may be much higher.

7. To help to scope the size of this potential problem in the wider landscape staff working for the AONB Unit carried out a very rapid, car-based survey of the AONB between 16 September and 26 October 2016. Key routes through and around the AONB were broken down into roughly equal survey sections based on either 1km square grid line boundaries or distances between road junctions. Each section was driven slowly to enable estimation of the coverage of ash trees within hedgerows or other roadside boundaries and within fields adjacent to the road. Notes were made on the general abundance of ash as a component of the treed landscape and the visual prominence of ash alongside any other tree species that were also present. The proportion of young, mature and veteran ash trees were estimated and a judgement made – using a Red, Amber and Green categorization – as to what the visual impact on the landscape within that survey section that might be if ash dieback were to cause the death of those trees.

8. A number of individual, prominent ash trees were photographed, measured (Circumference at Breast Height) and the general condition of their canopy noted. Other photographs were taken at various locations along the survey routes.

9. The results of the survey assessment are currently being mapped and further analysis will be carried out to identify those areas or landscape types within the AONB which might be most vulnerable to the effects of ash dieback and the potential extent of the visual impact that might result.

10. Once the results of this work are known, consideration could be given to the development of a recovery plan which might comprise:

    - Identification of desirable replacement trees in different locations and settings,
    - Early discussions with landowners to establish levels of interest in planting new trees to replace specimens of,
    - Development of a grant assistance package.

11. It is recognised, of course, that no one will want to rush to replace trees which are not yet dead or dying. Indeed, advice from the likes of the Forestry Commission is not to fell ash trees when this is not needed. There is likely to be a small percentage of the stock that will be tolerant or resistant to the disease and it is important that these trees are allowed to survive. However, given the time it takes for newly planted trees to reach maturity it would also be well to be prepared for recovery action once it can be confirmed that notable ash trees in the AONB are being impacted by Chalara.

Recommendation

1. **The Committee is recommended to:**
    1. **Note and comment on the report,**
    2. **Discuss the merits and scope of a recovery plan,**
    3. **Identify landowners who might be interested in early work on establishing a replacement for ash in the landscape**.

Contact Points

County Council Contact Points
County Council: 01905 763763
Worcestershire Hub: 01905 765765
Email: worcestershirehub@worcestershire.gov.uk

Specific Contact Points for this report
James Bisset, Principal Countryside Officer, Herefordshire Council
Email: jbisset@herefordshire.gov.uk

Paul Esrich, Manager, Malvern Hills AONB Partnership
Tel: 01684 560616
Email: pesrich@malvernhillsaonb.org.uk