

Ash Dieback Information for Landowners

After a series of initial press releases, information for landowners on how to deal with Ash dieback has been difficult to find and lacking in any clear advice on how to manage the problem. The initial hope was that because of climatic and genetic reasons, Ash in the UK would prove more resistant than in the rest of Europe, it is now clear that this is not the case and based on research from Denmark and Poland we can expect the rapid decline and death of at least 90% of our forest Ash and 60-80% of the same species on our roadsides. The impact of this is ten times larger than Dutch Elm Disease. Ash dieback has reached nearly all areas of the UK and is rapidly infecting the 39 million cubic metres of standing trees in England.



For Landowners with pure Ash stands or with Ash in mixture this poses a real risk around management and income planning. In essence there is currently a window of opportunity in which the problem can be addressed without a significant loss of planned revenue from your woodland. It is important that you also recognise, that where those woodlands have public access or are adjacent to the public highway, there is an opportunity to manage the liability or duty of care before the instability of your trees become a threat to life or a substantial financial burden.

The Impact of the Disease



The first signs of the disease are usually leaf loss or stem lesions, often in the first two to three years this will not appear to be particularly significant, however a tree does not recover, and the leaf loss will continue over years 3-5 with larger branches failing to flush at all and crown thinning and dieback becoming clearly evident.

As the tree puts energy into resisting the disease, growth rates will slow significantly, and the tree will also have a lowered resistance to other diseases or fungal attacks.



Evidence suggests that the most significant of these secondary factors for woodland Ash is Honey Fungus (*Armillaria spp.*), this causes a rapid decay of the root system

and eventually the main stem, significantly reducing timber value and greatly increasing the hazards associated with any human activity within falling distance of those trees, including any harvesting or management work.

Management options

There are several options for management, but it is clear that doing nothing, should not be one of them, unless the woodland is isolated, and the objective is to create deadwood. The photograph to the right is of an Ash woodland in Kent where the disease was not immediately identified, no management took place and Honey fungus caused complete failure and reduced any timber value.



Where Honey fungus is not a threat there is some evidence that larger trees can continue to live for a few years after the first signs of the disease, although growth will be greatly reduced, and the tree instability and risk of catastrophic failure is greatly increased. Additionally, thinning around larger specimen trees can slow the progress of the disease and will allow identification of any resistant trees, but is unlikely to have any benefit on a large scale. The key to managing any retained Ash will be to carefully monitor the progress of the disease and act with urgency when crown dieback reaches a point where risk of branches dropping, and increased harvesting costs outweighs any benefit of retaining the trees.

Actions

Where diseased Ash is present in a woodland with public access or with adjacency to a road or public right of way, urgent action is recommended on the basis that there is a risk to life.

Equally, where an objective of woodland ownership is to generate income, the best advice must be to take immediate action to manage your Ash before the timber value decreases and harvesting costs spiral due to the increased risk to machinery and operators created by felling dead and broken trees. Currently, markets for quality saw-log material, firewood and biomass are positive and even those sites where the disease has caused tree death will in the short-term usually be able to show a positive financial return. The financial gamble is all about timing, as the disease becomes more evident, the market is likely to be saturated, meaning prices will fall from current levels, the result being that early intervention is likely to provide the best financial outcome for growers.

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