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After discovering the pest in the community, state expert warns that infestation 'will cause a real mess'

Bill McNee, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources forest health specialist, painted a grim picture when talking to Fredonia residents last week during an informational meeting about the presence of the emerald ash borer.

"Now that the borer has been identified in the community, by the year 2018 — five years from now — I would say the vast majority if not virtually all the ash trees in Fredonia will be dead or dying," McNee said.

"Maybe the village staff should cover their ears, but it will cause a real mess for the Village of Fredonia, with time usually devoted to cutting grass and maintaining grounds taken up with removing infested trees. Falling branches and limbs could pose a real safety hazard."

McNee has been tracking the ash blight spread by the green bug since it began appearing in Wisconsin in 2008.

That first infestation was in the Newburg area, and has since been reported in 14 counties in the state.

To underline how serious the threat is, McNee showed a recent slide of an area along Highway 33 that first hit by the bug with a stand of virtually denuded trees that looked like late December rather than early summer.

"This is our future unless you act," he warned.

The ash borer was discovered in Fredonia this spring, when McNee visited a dying tree near the Oakwood Forest lift station on Ridgeway Circle following a local Arbor Day presentation.

More recently, he said infested trees have also been identified in the Town of Fredonia.

McNee said the problem with the borer is that trees don't usually show signs of infestation until it is present for two or three years. Trees start dying after five years.

Signs of ash borer presence include thinning of the foliage, typically from the town down as the bug's larvae eat their way through the trunk, and increased number of woodpeckers eating the pests.

McNee said infested trees also often display epicormic sprouting, growth from odd places on the tree trunk, which he characterized as "a last gasp to survive."

Since its arrival in North America from the Orient in the late 1980s, McNee said the presence of emerald ash borer has proven to kill 99.7% of the trees it infests. That prospect is devastating

for Wisconsin, which has an estimated 700 million ash trees.

Public Works Director Roger Strohm said the Village of Fredonia has about 80 ash trees on public land, although the number of trees on private property is certain to be much higher.

Strohm said the village has targeted prime specimen ash trees it wants to protect, and is expected to gradually cut down weakened or less-desirable trees.

McNee said property owners need to go through the same evaluation process, determining which trees are worth the effort and expense of treating with pesticides.

“In many cases, it makes more economic sense to take the tree down and replace it with a burr oak or something else,” he said.

Over-the-counter treatments have varying success rates, and tree services can be expensive if the property owner wants to save a major stand of trees, McNee said.

He said property owners who want to protect their ash trees with appropriate pesticides can expected to spend about $10 per diameter inch for the rest of the tree’s life.

Strohm said the village will be gradually thinning out its ash stock.

“We don’t have the workforce to cut them all down, so we’ll be treating them to extend their life and remove them in increments,” he said.

Strohm said property owners in the village who suspect they have infested trees should call the village to verify the presence of the bug.

The village is still formulating a policy on how to handle wood from removed ash trees.

Officials fear the greatest source for the spread of the ash borer is transferring firewood from infested areas.