

Oak Wilt Update--An Urgent Call for Community-wide Efforts!

by Josh Shields

In Manistee and surrounding counties, oaks are among the most common and dominant species in many forests. Moreover, they are a significant source of timber revenues. But for many Northern Michigan residents, oak wilt--caused by the non-native fungus *Ceratocystis fagacearum*--has had a very direct and troubling impact on communities by killing oak trees. And the disease is wreaking havoc on a valuable timber resource in Michigan, particularly trees in the "red oak group." Trees in this group can be identified by their leaves with "pointed" tips, and include northern red oak, black oak, and northern pin oak species. The oak wilt fungus, closely related to the same fungus that caused Dutch Elm Disease, kills oak trees by clogging the water transport system, thus causing the rapid wilting of leaves seen in infected trees. Once oak wilt has infected a tree, it can easily spread underground to neighboring oak trees via root grafts, and it can also spread above-ground from the sap-feeding beetles that carry the fungal spores to other trees.



Since 2016, through a DNR grant funded by the Michigan Invasive Species Program (MISGP) the Manistee Conservation District and collaborators have worked to assist landowners in combatting oak wilt by providing cost-share money through the "Slowing and Preventing Oak Wilt" grant. The 18-month grant provides a limited amount of cost share money to landowners in a 10-county area in Northern and Western Michigan. Although the results are promising, and we've learned lessons that can help influence future management decisions, it will take much more than assistance from one short-lived grant to effectively combat oak wilt and keep it at bay.

As oak wilt becomes more prevalent in Michigan, proper education about how to identify the disease, coupled with pro-active practices that can help slow the spread, will be a critical necessity. This will require a dedicated community effort if we are to save the oaks that so many of us value, and this effort will also require involvement from all sectors of the community.

So, what does a community-wide effort entail, and what can Northwestern Michigan residents do, starting now? Below is a list of proven action steps that individual community members can take to make a clear difference in slowing the spread of oak wilt.

- 1) Learn how to identify which oak species are on your property. As mentioned, oak wilt mainly infects oaks in the "red oak group", and this includes trees that are otherwise perfectly healthy. Oaks in the "white oak group" can be infected but are typically resistant.
- 2) Pay close attention to your "red oak group" trees. If you see leaves suddenly turning a yellow or bronze color AND drop from the tree, typically in June or July, contact the Manistee CD or other professional qualified to diagnose oak wilt. Note that other diseases and pests can also affect and kill oak trees, so please contact a qualified professional if you are not sure.
- 4) Observe the DON'T MOVE INFECTED WOOD dictum. DO NOT cut or prune your oak trees from April through the end of August, as pruning wounds can attract the sap-feeding beetles that spread oak wilt. Again, do not move infected oak firewood! Movement of infected wood is the primary cause of tree species loss.
- 5) IMPORTANT - Get involved! This means citizens, natural resources professionals, community leaders, and anybody else with something to lose from a dwindling oak resource!
- 6) Tree service companies, including those pruning oak trees along utility right-of-ways, should consider using a pruning sealer on wounds if pruning during the bad time of year is unavoidable. While the use of sealers has been debated among some professionals, sealers clearly provide a physical barrier between fresh wounds and the picnic beetles that carry the oak wilt fungal spores.
- 7) If possible, consider restricting pruning activities to the dormant season! Timber harvesting should also not occur during this critical period when there is risk of creating wounds on residual oak trees that can result in picnic beetles introducing oak wilt to the forest.

8) It is also important for leaders such as the County Board of Commissioners, Township Officers, the County Road Commission, and watershed groups to become actively involved in helping to emphasize the importance of bad pruning practices and not moving infected firewood.

9) In some areas with high levels of tourism, movement of infected firewood can be a major contributing factor to problematic oak wilt infections. Slowing the spread of oak wilt can only occur if a community-wide team effort is the strategy!

10) Contact your Forestry Assistance Program (FAP) forester for a site visit to determine if you have oak wilt, handouts about oak wilt, technical information, and advice. If your property is in Manistee, Mason, or the western half of Lake County, contact Josh Shields at 231-889-9666 (Office Phone), 989-220-9236 (Mobile Phone), or via email at joshua.shields@macd.org.

