

Harvest & shipping season soon underway with trees certified free of sudden oak death

Oregon Christmas trees get clean bill of health

October 27, 2004... Faced with a remote but real threat from the organism that causes sudden oak death, Oregon's Christmas tree industry has come through a comprehensive inspection and certification program with flying colors, signaling a clean start to the harvest and shipping season this fall. The leading producer of Christmas trees in the United States, Oregon can now assure its customers across the country and around the world that its trees are free from pests and diseases of concern.

"Even though the risk of sudden oak death in our trees is minimal, we take these kinds of issues very seriously," says Bryan Ostlund, executive secretary of the Pacific Northwest Christmas Tree Association. "The industry has used this certification program to jump in front of the issue and we are pleased with the results."

Along with Oregon's nursery industry, the state's Christmas tree producers asked the Oregon Department of Agriculture to create a mandatory inspection, testing, and certification program designed to detect the presence of *Phytophthora ramorum*, the fungus that causes sudden oak death. Before any trees are allowed to be shipped from Oregon, the growers need to complete the inspection and certification process. In roughly the past three months, ODA has been able to check 588 Christmas tree plantations. Using both a visual inspection and laboratory analysis of random samples, ODA found no cases of *P. ramorum* in Oregon Christmas trees. The clean bill of health comes at the right time.

"We are confident that the Christmas trees grown in Oregon are free of the disease," says Gary McAninich, supervisor of ODA's Nursery and Christmas Tree Program. "This has been a very important program in that we wanted to assure our customers and ourselves that Oregon is providing Christmas trees free of sudden oak death. No one had been looking for the disease in Christmas tree plantations to this degree in the past. So we felt it was necessary to look at all of our Christmas tree growers to show this is not a problem in Oregon."

Last year, Oregon sold 6.6 million Christmas trees with about 81 percent shipped out of the state. ODA has always inspected trees for dangerous pests and diseases before issuing the all-important phytosanitary certificate that allows shipment. This year's new disease of concern is sudden oak death.

"We have to send our trees to where the customers are, and most of them are not in Oregon," says McAninich. "It is important that these other states and countries feel confident that they are getting clean Christmas trees from Oregon."

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Without the inspection and certification program, things might have been different for Oregon's Christmas trees.

"We get inquiries all the time from other states on the issue of sudden oak death," says McAninch. "Now we are able to tell them that we've done a large mandatory certification program for both Oregon Christmas trees and nursery products susceptible to *P. ramorum*. That has provided assurance for them. In my opinion, it is likely that this program has headed off some potential state quarantines against Oregon Christmas trees."

The perception of sudden oak death affecting Oregon Christmas trees has been far greater than the actual threat, according to McAninch. ODA officials have always believed it was unlikely that the disease would be found in a Christmas tree plantation setting.

"The areas where *P. ramorum* has been found in Douglas fir trees are unusual settings," says McAninch. "The affected Douglas firs were stressed understory trees found in forested areas of California where the overstory tanoaks and California bay laurel were heavily infected. That put a lot of disease pressure on the Douglas firs and only then did they become infected. We just don't have that kind of situation in Oregon."

One side benefit of the comprehensive inspection and certification program for Oregonians is an assurance that any local Christmas tree they purchase or harvest at choose and cut locations this holiday season is similarly free of the disease. Even though most Oregon Christmas trees leave the state, there is a large and important customer base within the borders.

Meanwhile, ODA inspectors are running a bit ahead of schedule this year because of the certification and inspection program designed for sudden oak death. The usual crunch of issuing phytosanitary certificates in November and early December has been eased because of the earlier inspections. Oregon Christmas trees will begin making their way to export destinations and other states over the course of the next several weeks.

Once again, Mexico is the top export market for Oregon Christmas trees. Last year, a vast majority of shipments— 1,385 out of a total of 1,470 for all countries— made their way to Mexico. While sudden oak death was not on the radar last year, Mexican officials have been watching the issue closely this year. The targeted inspection and certification program will help keep that important export market open for Oregon growers.

No one can say for certain whether sudden oak death will remain a long term challenge for Oregon or if the issue will eventually become a lesser concern. But for now, ODA plans to continue a certification program of some kind in the near term.

"We are going to stay vigilant so we can provide assurance that our Christmas trees remain clean and of high quality," says McAninch.

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