

Around Town

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Thursday, September 2, 2010

www.timescourier.com

Trail association working to treat infested hemlock trees in Cherry Log

by Whitney Crouch

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The Benton MacKaye Trail Association was incorporated in 1980 to create and maintain a 288-mile trail stretching from the top of Springer Mountain on the border of Gilmer and Fannin counties to Davenport Gap on the northern edge of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

In the ensuing 30 years, this nonprofit organization has not strayed from its mission of "leaving a foot-path for generations to follow."

Indeed, in keeping with this strong focus on conservation, BMTA members took steps over the summer

to counter a serious threat to the stands of eastern hemlock trees along the Benton MacKaye Trail.

These beautiful conifers are facing extermination due to the hemlock woolly adelgid, a destructive pest similar to an aphid that feeds on hemlock sap. These bugs were accidentally introduced in Virginia in the 1950s, and since then, the pest has spread steadily throughout the Appalachian Mountains, decimating the eastern hemlock population as it goes.

Adelgids were first discovered in Georgia in 2003 in Rabun County and reached Gilmer County within the last few years.

In an effort to halt the

local devastation caused by these bugs, members of the BMTA spent several days this summer treating stands of hemlocks along a popular section of trail in the Cherry Log Mountain development near Highway 515.

Through these efforts, they hope to save some of the trees, but as BMTA president Ralph Heller noted, "We realize it's impossible to save them all ... the adelgids are just devastating the hemlocks in a lot of areas."

Still, the treatments are an important "stopgap measure," which will give some trees another five or six years of healthy growth.

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In an effort to deal with a hemlock woolly adelgid infestation, Benton MacKaye Trail Association construction director Eric Eades chemically treats a hemlock tree in Cherry Log.

Hemlock ————— *from 1D*

Scientists hope that in that amount of time the populations of the predatory beetles they are developing will have grown enough to counter and stop the spread of the adelgids.

To help with the conservation effort, Heller encourages local homeowners to seriously consider treating the hemlocks on their property.

"Take into consideration these big trees," he said. "The cost to remove them is much more than to treat them."

BMTA members Josh Chastain, Ralph Heller, Eric Eades and Tom Mitchell conducted the treatments in Cherry Log. On most trees they used soil injections of

imidacloprid, but on some of the larger or heavily infested trees, they used a more potent chemical called Safari.

Joe Sisson provided the funds for the chemicals to treat the trees along the trail.

"[Sisson] has been very cooperative with us and has been nothing but the best of supporters for us since the trail started," Heller stated.

The BMTA members plan to treat more hemlocks this fall in an effort to protect the ecosystem and preserve the beauty of the trail corridor for future generations.

For more information about the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, visit www.bmta.org.