

Researchers take steps to combat hemlock pest

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. (AP) — Researchers are taking steps to protect the Cumberland Plateau from the hemlock woolly adelgid that's already spread into southeast Tennessee and north Georgia.

Walden on Signal Mountain already has a large and growing infestation of the bug that sucks the life from hemlocks, officials said. And the parasite has been found on Lookout Mountain.

In north Georgia, the bug has moved through the Blue Ridge area eastward into Fannin, Murray and Gilmer counties.

"When it gets headed to the valley, it will be really hard to contain," John Thomason, an arborist with ABC Tree Service in Harrison, told the Chattanooga Times Free Press.

In Georgia, about \$70,000 of the Chattahoochee National Forest's \$3.3 million in stimulus money is going to fight the pest.

And in Tennessee, state parks officials have partnered with the Landscape Analysis Lab. Faculty and students will use a Geographic Information System to analyze imagery of Fall Creek Falls State Park to help research and prioritize hemlock stands there.

"It's important to do something," said Stuart Carroll, naturalist for the Fall Creek Falls State Park, adding that the lab's map analysis will help prioritize which hemlocks to try to save.

Researchers at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and at four other schools in the Southeast have started growing a predator beetle, now being released in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and other areas. But the beetles can't be grown fast enough to keep up with the adelgid, officials said.

James Johnson with the Georgia Forestry Commission said the beetles may be the long-term answer, but the short-term response will have to be insecticides, which may take more resources than state and federal forest officials can provide.

"It's spreading faster than we expected it would," Johnson said.

However, Carroll and Johnson said homeowners can help by treating their hemlocks themselves or paying an arborist for the service.

"In Georgia, we have a program to help homeowners drench or inject the roots of their trees with insecticide," Johnson said.

Gene Hyde, arborist for Chattanooga, said the only tree service he knows of locally offering hemlock service is ABC Tree Service.

ABC's owner, Carl Absher, said he was galvanized to fight adelgids when he visited his hometown in Virginia a few years ago and saw dying stands of hemlocks that he had stood among as a child.

"It's enough to make you cry back in those old-growth forests," he said.