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Beetle invasion could have dire consequences

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KANSAS CITY, MO (KCTV) -

Six million ash trees are at risk of dying across the metro because of a beetle invasion that experts say could have dire environmental and financial consequences for communities.

The emerald ash borer is an invasive beetle that has destroyed millions of ash trees in North America in at least 25 states, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

The beetle was discovered in Kansas City three years ago and has already killed hundreds of trees in Platte and Clay counties.

Kansas City forester Kevin Lapointe said it is only getting started.

"This problem is here. It's not going away and it needs to be dealt with now," said Lapointe, who called dealing with the beetle the toughest challenge he has faced in his position.

Lapointe said the city has been treating ash trees on city-owned land, as have other municipal governments.

Now, he is urging homeowners and private property owners to protect their trees or face the consequences of life without a tree that provides numerous benefits.

Lapointe said not only do ash trees beautify neighborhoods and businesses, they also help prevent flooding by absorbing storm water runoff.

Gladstone homeowner Sean O'Brien decided to treat his trees, including the nearly 60-year-old ash tree in his front yard.

"We noticed problems with other trees in the neighborhood," said O'Brien. "We're doing what we can to save our trees. I hope enough of our neighbors do the same that it doesn't spoil the overall look of the neighborhood."

Nick Goergen, with Urban Tree Specialists, has stayed busy this summer treating trees.

"I am treating anywhere between 30 and 50 trees a day," said Goergen. "A lot of people call in because they're starting to notice damage in the tree specifically."

Treatment includes injecting a chemical into the base of the tree.

While treatment can cost property owners a few hundred dollars, depending on the size and number of trees being treated, experts say it's much cheaper than removing a dead tree which can cost thousands of dollars.

Experts say if an ash tree has a lot of damage at the top it might be too late to save it. Trees infested with the ash borer may not show any signs of damage.

"Your trees are not going to start dying right away. It takes a few years. But when they start dying, it's too late," said Lapointe.

One way to tell if a tree is infested is to look for D-shaped exit holes in the bark, where the adult beetles emerge. But the only sure way to know is to have experts inspect it.

Lapointe said it is too late to save many trees in Kansas City.

"We're going to lose these trees. There's no question about that. We're going to lose thousands of these trees all over the metro area," said Lapointe. "People are going to see their communities really devastated by this beetle."

Lapointe said property owners also need to plant a variety of trees, to prevent problems in the future.

O'Brien is happy he acted quick enough to save his trees.

"These trees keep us cool in the summer time, lots of shade. They're really attractive trees in the fall," he said.

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