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Dallas must dig deep to protect its forests

There's a plan to mitigate emerald ash borer invasion, if only the city would implement it

Dormant ash and willow trees line the banks where White Rock Creek meets the Trinity River in the Great Trinity Forest. (Lynda M. González/Staff Photographer)

By STEVE HOUSER

The emerald ash borer is a destructive pest that has made its way to Fort Worth and Denton and now threatens the forest areas of Dallas.

Fortunately, Dallas already has a plan to mitigate the problem, if only the city would implement it.

The ash borer was first found in Michigan in 2002 and by 2018 had spread to 33 states, killing millions of ash trees. Chemical treatments can protect a tree for up to two years, but the treatment is costly. There is no organic treatment that is proven to be effective.

The responsible approach is the advice in the Great Trinity Forest and Wildlife Management Plan, approved by the Dallas City Council in 2008. The plan was completed by forest and wildlife experts at Stephen F. Austin University and supported by the city of Dallas Urban Forest Advisory Committee. The plan calls for the slow removal and replacement of selective ash trees, which made up over 40% of the tree population at the time. Dallas would not be facing as big a problem if the plan had been implemented.

Forestry experts know that diversity of tree and plant species within a forest is critical to establishing and maintaining a healthy ecological balance. The more diverse the forest species, the better the forest can endure insect, disease or weather-related problems, and the more kinds of wildlife there will be.

Out of 4,667 acres included in the management plan, 2,257 acres were mixed ash (or mostly ash) and 121 acres were stands of all ash. Research shows that within a few years of the ash borers reaching the Great Trinity Forest, the ash could be lost, creating a high potential for fire, even in a relatively wet river bottom.

Our area has been in nonattainment with federal air quality standards for over 26 years. Trees capture and hold air pollution such as carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and low-level ozone. Trees also reduce particulate matter in the air from vehicle exhaust and other sources. As the ash trees die and decay, they will release these materials back into the air, further reducing our air quality.

If we selectively remove some of the ash trees and use them to make products such as flooring or furniture, they hold the materials for a long time, making it an environmentally responsible solution to consider.

In addition, as the ash trees die, they will eventually fall and damage other nearby plants and trees, the same as if they were cut for timber. However, the trees cut for timber are removed from the site, which reduces the potential for fire and may improve the ability for new trees and other plants to grow.

Eventually, ash trees in public areas that are not given the costly chemical treatment will likely die and may require removal to protect people and property from failing limbs and trunks.

The Nature Conservancy owns the Woodbourne Forest and Wildlife Preserve in Pennsylvania, which was previously threatened with the ash borer. The conservancy decided to log trees that may pose a threat to public safety. They also noted the pest is difficult to locate and the value of the timber is lower after a tree is infested.

The Dallas Environment and Sustainability Committee recently agreed to establish an emerald ash borer task force, which is a good start. The management plan from 2008 should be updated and implemented instead of delayed again. Responsible action now to implement a borer action plan will head off larger problems later.

Steve Houser is an arborist in Dallas. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.