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Redbay trees dying; could be in danger across Southeast

The Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. --

A little used but ecologically important tree is dying in droves along the Southeast coast because of an insect imported through the ports from Asia.

The redbay, which typically serves as lush greenery in the 15-25 foot height range in coastal forests, is being killed by the redbay ambrosia beetle - an Asian import that likely came to the states in redbay wood used in packing crates.

The first beetle showed up in traps at Port Wentworth in Savannah in 2002.

This year, the beetles' handiwork is visible in South Carolina Hunting Island State Park. Volunteers counted 2,068 dead trees within 30 feet of the park's roads and trails in February and experts worry the entire population could be wiped out.

"It's very sad to see it," said Laurie Reid, an entomologist with the South Carolina Forestry Commission. "People visit a state park expecting to see green trees."

Although the tree fits nicely between tall Sabal palmettos and ground-clinging saw palmettos, it really has few uses. The tree's wood is rarely used in furniture. Its leaf has many of the same qualities as bay leaves used in cooking, but most commercial bay leaves come from California and Mediterranean species.

The trees are used by landscapers because of their drought-tolerance, but they can easily be replaced.

"You don't really notice it because it's an understory tree, but it does add a lot of green to the forest," said Laurel Weeks, interpretive program manager at Hunting Island. "It does fill a niche in the maritime forest. We don't know if something is going to come along to take its place."

But as one of eight major tree species in coastal forests, the redbay plays a large role in the ecosystem, Reid said. Besides the birds and deer that feed on the leaves and small black fruit, the Palamedes swallowtail butterfly lays its eggs exclusively in the redbay.

And the beetle problem isn't exclusive to South Carolina. Damaged redbays have been found in 32 counties here and in Georgia and Florida.

Federal officials and forestry and agricultural scientists from the three states have been monitoring the disease caused by the beetle since 2004.

"We're trying to find out the biology of the beetle, find out where the beetle is and where it isn't," Reid said.

In Asia, the beetle attacks only stressed trees, but here it has attacked healthy ones too. The disease spreads rapidly and signs at Hunting Island ask campers not to take redbay wood off the island. The beetle and the fungus it causes have shown up in other trees similar to the redbay, but they are not as damaged.

Officials have been reluctant to use pesticide for fear of killing other insects.