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NEWS

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Pine Needle Scale Affecting Grand County Lodgepole Pines

GRANBY, Colo. – Many Grand County residents may be wondering why their lodgepole pines have suddenly begun to appear unhealthy, with yellowing or fading needles. In many cases, foresters are finding that the trees are now suffering from a tiny insect called pine needle scale.

Pine needle scale is a native forest insect that generally keeps a low profile. The scale is usually held in check by nature, with cold weather and predatory insects such as lady beetles keeping populations at relatively low levels. But at higher population levels, infestations of the insect can easily be identified by the presence of numerous hard, white spots dotting pine needles of infested trees – each spot about the size of pencil tip. The spots represent a waxy, protective coating the insects create once they latch onto a pine needle, where they will remain permanently to feed on sap.

“We always see some amount of pine needle scale in the woods,” says Ryan McNertney, assistant district forester for the Colorado State Forest Service Granby District. “But this year we are seeing whole areas where infestations are so bad that they are actually affecting the health and vigor of the trees.”

McNertney says many landowners in Grand County are calling in and describing their lodgepole pines as being a dingy green or yellow color. This damage can in extreme cases lead to premature loss of needles and twig dieback. With the mountain pine beetle epidemic fresh in everyone’s minds, McNertney understands that landowners are worried that their trees might die from the needle scale, but it generally does not cause tree mortality. Large outbreaks of these insects are rare in Colorado, and seldom last long.

However, there is little that landowners can do to combat these insects, especially after they have formed the protective white scales. McNertney said some landowners may opt to use horticultural oils and insecticidal soaps to kill pine needle scale, but warns that these measures may only dry the tree out and cause further damage.

The CSFS Granby District serves Grand, Summit and Eagle counties. For more information about pine needle scale or other forest insect and disease concerns, contact the district at 970-887-3121 or visit csfs.colostate.edu.

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