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NEWS

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Yellowing Pine Needles Normal in Autumn

CAÑON CITY, Colo. – Most of the evergreen trees along the southern Front Range with dying yellow or brown needles likely are going through a natural shedding process, and are not infested by bark beetles or tree disease.

“It’s fall now, which means we’re in peak needle-drop season,” said District Forester John Grieve of the Colorado State Forest Service Cañon City District. “The yellow, dying needles people are seeing on their pine and fir trees are simply part of a natural cycle.”

Every autumn, many Colorado evergreen tree species shed some of their older, interior needles as part of an annual growth cycle. Needles on the lower portion of the crowns or closest to the trunk are most commonly shed, but trees stressed due to drought or root damage may shed more needles to keep the tree in balance with its root system. Soon-to-be shed needles typically turn yellow first, then a reddish-brown color before dropping off; very small branches with few needles on them also may die.

In the CSFS Cañon City District, which includes Fremont, Pueblo and Custer counties, ponderosa pine and white fir are the tree species that commonly shed needles from late August through October.

Evergreen trees that shed fall needles have a different appearance than trees infested by bark beetles. The needles on a beetle-infested tree typically change color throughout the entire tree, initially starting with an off-shade of green and turning to reddish-orange by the following summer. In addition to changing needle color, bark beetle-infested trees will show other signs of attack, such as fine sawdust at the base of the tree.

The seasonal discoloration and loss of pine needles frequently is called “needle cast,” but the term actually refers to a fungal disease of spruce and fir trees.

For more information about tree and forest health, contact the CSFS Cañon City District at 719-275-6865 or visit csfs.colostate.edu.

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