

Community encouraged to help save kauri



A new kauri rescue project is being launched in Titirangi this month, following disturbing results of the latest kauri dieback survey in the Waitakere Ranges.

The average number of trees infected across the ranges is now one in five, up from eight percent five years ago. In areas where kauri dominate, the deadly pathogen is now affecting between 33 percent and 58 percent of trees, making localised extinction in places such as Piha highly likely.

The kauri rescue project is a joint initiative being funded for two years from the government's Biological Heritage National Science Challenge. It aims to engage local communities in helping infected trees to help themselves, by treating them with a chemical called phosphite.

"We've seen that where we've treated trees with phosphite the lesions at the base, which spread and eventually kill the tree, stop and then heal," says project team leader Dr Ian Horner of Plant and Food Research. "We hope people will find this new opportunity empowering."

The 'citizen science tool' will be used in stage one with a small number of private landowners to test and refine it before being expanded to a wider group. Landowners will also be encouraged to test other treatment techniques that span western science and matoranga Maori methods.

Phosphite has so far lessened the symptoms of dieback and prolonged the life of the tree rather than offered a cure. While there are some concerns about the risk of over-dosing

trees, project member and Tree Council secretary, Dr Mels Barton, says this risk is worth taking.

"We cannot afford to wait any longer. The possibility of killing some trees while saving others is worth taking in our view. We don't want to imagine a future without kauri in the ranges," she says.

The ranges are the number one hotspot for the disease in New Zealand and the Auckland Council survey shows infection is worst along the track network, suggesting people rather than wild animals are spreading it. Eighty-three percent of park visitors are either walking past cleaning stations without scrubbing their shoes and spraying them with trigene, going off-track or disregarding the many track closures.

The council has introduced kauri dieback ambassadors into high-use parts of the ranges over the summer to ensure more visitors use the cleaning stations and understand their importance. Some tracks have also been re-routed to avoid kauri, boardwalks constructed and drainage improved.

The kauri rescue project was generated partly from concern about budget cuts to Auckland Council's Biosecurity Kauri Dieback Unit last year, which resulted in the loss of its field officer.

The project's public launch is at the Titirangi War Memorial Hall on Thursday, February 9 at 7pm. To find out more, go to www.KauriRescue.org.nz.



These trees in Titirangi village are already under threat from kauri dieback.



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