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Deputy Surveyor
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Dear Mr Macknamara

PHYTOPHTHORA RAMORUM IN CHAWTON PARK WOOD

Briefing

I write to inform you that a destructive tree and plant disease called Ramorum disease has been found infecting larch trees in Chawton Park Wood. Unfortunately, this means we will have to fell the trees immediately to limit the risk of the disease spreading further afield.

Background

Ramorum disease is caused by *Phytophthora ramorum* (*P. ramorum*), which is a fungus-like pathogen which has been causing extensive damage and deaths to trees and other plants in parts of the United Kingdom since it was first discovered here in 2002. It is thought to be of Asian origin, and to have been introduced to Europe and North America in the international trade in live plants. Until recently in Europe it was mostly found on plants and shrubs, especially rhododendron, viburnum and camellia, but slightly different strains of the organism have caused significant damage and deaths to many trees and other plants in parts of the USA.

However, few trees in the UK were affected until 2009, when *P. ramorum* was found infecting and killing large numbers of Japanese larch trees in South West England. Since then it has been found on larch trees in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The organism thrives in moist conditions, so wetter, western regions of Great Britain have been most affected. However, it has been found in a small number of locations in drier, eastern regions, of which Chawton Park Wood is one.

The outbreak in 2009 was the first time in the world that *P. ramorum* had infected and sporulated (produced the infective spores which spread the disease) on large numbers of a commercially important conifer tree species. Infected larch trees produce exceptionally large quantities of the spores, which can be carried by the wind from tall trees many hundreds of metres to infect other trees and plants over a wide area. There is no cure, so the infected trees must be felled – preferably before the peak sporulation period in the autumn – to try to contain the disease and limit further spread. All trees infected by *P. ramorum* are subject to statutory control under the Plant Health (Forestry) Order 2005.

We have a dual role to play in tackling the disease. The first is to control the disease in the public forests which we manage, such as Chawton Park Wood, and the second is to work with other landowners to help them to take the necessary action when the disease is found in their woodlands.

You might have seen this disease referred to as 'sudden oak death' in the media. This is because different strains of the organism have caused the deaths of large numbers of North American native oak and tanoak trees in western parts of the USA. However, the name is a misnomer in the UK because so far our native British oak species (sessile and pedunculate oak) have been little affected by the two European strains of the *P. ramorum* organism. We prefer the term 'Ramorum disease' to avoid confusion with another disease, acute oak decline, which is a quite different condition, and to avoid giving the impression that our native oak trees are at risk from the disease, which at present they are not. Some of the media are also now referring to the disease as 'sudden Larch death' and 'Larch tree disease'.

Impact in Chawton Park Wood

The infection in Chawton Park Wood has been found on the Japanese Larch trees which line the main avenue and Sustrans cycle route through the wood. All of these trees have to be removed. Felling will be carried out throughout September, and will affect about 4 hectares overall (about 10 acres).

There will be some temporary access restrictions for public safety reasons in areas where felling is being carried out. However, we do not envisage any total closure of the woods, and route diversions will be signposted.

In addition, because this felling is focused on disease control in the first instance, the timber has yet to be sold, so there will be logs stacked at roadside in the woods for a while.

'Bio-security' measures are also in place for visitors and workers leaving the forest, such as asking visitors to brush soil and plant material off their footwear, clothing, wheels and dogs before leaving, and washing them at home before visiting another park, garden or woodland. This is a crucial step in helping to reduce the risk of spreading the disease further into the nearby environment.

We understand that this felling will have an impact on the landscape of Chawton Park Wood, and will cause disappointment and concern to local residents, especially those who use it for walking, cycling and horse riding. Although regular visitors will be used to forestry work being carried out, because it is a working forest, felling to this extent in this popular area might cause some concern.

We will replant the avenue as quickly as possible, although not with larch trees, because the *P. ramorum* organism stays active in the soil for several years. Replacement species appropriate to the Forest Design Plan will be selected for their aesthetic and wildlife values, and their ability to withstand pests, diseases and climate change.

This felling is being done on the best and most up-to-date scientific advice. Although no one, least of all foresters, wants to see valuable trees felled before they should be, it is essential that infected trees are felled quickly to contain the disease and limit the spread to neighbouring areas and plants.

Communication

We are communicating with local residents and forest users in the following ways:

- a press release will be issued to local newspapers to explain the reason for felling and outline the facts about *P. ramorum*;

- this letter is being sent to local Parish Councils, Alton Town Council and the Arboricultural Officer at East Hampshire DC;
- information is available on the Forestry Commission website at www.forestry.gov.uk/pramorum; and
- signage on site to explain to visitors what is happening and why.

I am sorry to have to bring you this news, but give my assurance that we will do all we can to ensure that the affected area recovers as quickly as possible, and that Chawton Park Wood remains an attractive place for local people to enjoy.

In the meantime, if you would like to discuss this further, please get in touch with our forester for the area, Michael Ullman, who can be contacted through our office number of 0300 067 4600.

Yours sincerely



Bruce Rothnie
Forest Management Director
South England Forest District