

Emerald Ash Borer Management Strategy

Climate factors and disease are just a few of the threats that will continue to impact our natural areas indefinitely. As a result, Polk County Conservation (PCC) works diligently to improve woodland management and diversify our native plantings countywide.

PCC has been concerned about the Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) since 2006 and completed our first assessment of trees in our “mowed areas” during the winter of 2006-2007. The initial inventory identified 774 ash trees in our “mowed or manicured” areas. Since that time, PCC has implemented a strategic tree removal and replanting action plan that is outlined below. The borer is expected to be confirmed in Polk County within 1-2 years. One beneficial characteristic of EAB is its slow moving nature. Once affected, it takes a tree 3-5 years to die from EAB. This lengthy process, coupled with sufficient forewarning, has allowed our staff to develop a thoughtful and constructive approach to address EAB.

Ash trees in our mowed areas have been inventoried and classified into three risk zones which include: very high risk, high risk and moderate risk. These risk classifications mainly take into consideration the safety of our park users and the overall health of the tree. Staff will take a different approach in managing its remaining areas which are classified as low risk/wild areas. Limited removal of ash will occur in these areas and evaluation will be done on an individual basis as needed to ensure safety and promote a healthy forest. Studies have found that there are no benefits associated with removing ash trees in natural areas to reduce the spread of EAB.

While PCC continues to research ways to use the excess lumber derived from ash tree removals, we currently are using the lumber for park firewood and wood chips to mulch trails. We have also encouraged the public to obtain firewood cutting permits from us. This win-win situation reduces the number of ash trees in our parks and provides free firewood to the public.

Currently, PCC has 544 ash trees that remain standing in our mowed areas. Therefore, 230 trees (30%) have been removed since 2008. Additionally, staff has planted replacement trees where ash have been removed or will be removed in the future to maintain the integrity of our mowed areas. Once the borer arrives, PCC does not anticipate using chemical treatments to preserve ash trees unless it is temporarily necessary while a replacement tree matures. PCC will be reluctant to take on the long term cost associated with chemical treatments.

PCC expects our removal and replanting process to continue for approximately five more years. If there is a silver lining to EAB, it will be the newfound emphasis on the importance of species diversity and sound woodland management planning. Native hardwoods such as oak, hackberry, walnut, cherry, and maple will regenerate and thrive as ash die off through Mother Nature’s amazing cycle of life.