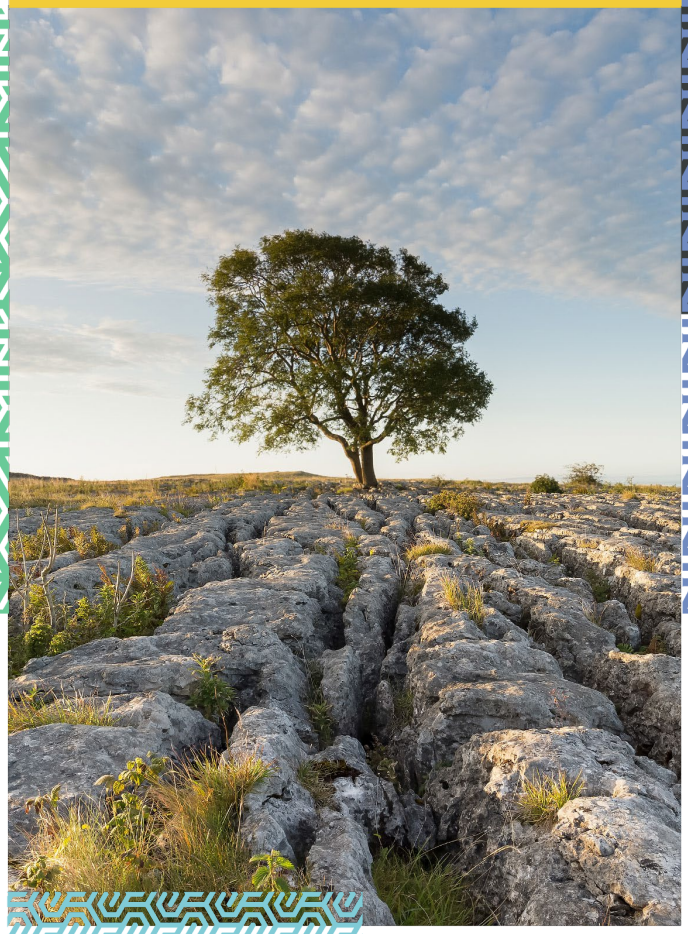
Risk control

Ash Dieback



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Ash Dieback

Introduction

Ash Dieback (also known as 'Chalara') is a lethal disease for Ash trees which is caused by a fungus (Chalara fraxinea). Originating in Asia, it has devastated Ash tree populations across Europe as our species has not evolved a defence to it[1].

Ash Dieback is particularly destructive for the UK's native Common or European ash, with estimations suggesting that it will kill up to 80% of Ash trees across the UK at a cost to British society of £15 billion[2].

It can affect Ash trees of all ages. While mature trees may survive for a few seasons once infected, younger trees may die in much shorter timeframes.

It can be fatal in its own right, however, in many cases the tree may be weakened by the disease. It is then unable to resist other pathogens which ultimately result in the tree's demise.

The costs of Ash Dieback will be considerable with the disease leaving a marked effect on the British landscape. It may also compromise human safety due to the increased risk of structural failure of the infected trees[3]. The risk is particularly significant if an infected Ash tree is located near to or in areas of human habitation or other high risk areas such as close to road or rail networks.

Transmission

The fungus overwinters in leaf litter on the ground, particularly on Ash leaf stalks. It produces small white fruiting bodies between July and October which release spores into the surrounding atmosphere.

These spores can blow tens of miles away. They land on leaves, stick to and then penetrate into the leaf and beyond. The fungus then grows inside the tree, eventually blocking its water transport systems, causing it to die.

The tree can fight back, but year-on-year infections will eventually kill it[2].

Symptoms

Symptoms that an Ash tree has been infected with Ash Dieback include[2]:

- Leaves develop dark patches in the summer
- The leaves then wilt and discolour to black. The leaves might shed early
- Dieback of the shoots and leaves is visible in the summer
- Lesions develop where branches meet the trunk. These are often diamond-shaped and dark brown.
- Inner bark looks brownish-grey under the lesions
- New growth from previously dormant buds further down the trunk.

Ash Dieback Risk Management

The owner of land on which a tree is located is legally responsible for the health and safety of those who could be affected by that tree.

Organisations (and people) who manage Ash trees near higher risk areas such as roads, railways, buildings and other publicly accessible land must carefully consider the risks posed by an infected Ash tree. A risk assessment should be carried out for trees in these areas.

Infected Ash trees also pose a risk to the health and safety of people working on or near them due to the weakening of the structural integrity of the tree. A risk assessment should consider risk exposures to these people and identify appropriate controls.

It is worthwhile noting that some Ash trees may have genetic tolerance to Ash Dieback. Therefore, it is an important consideration to retain Ash trees where they stand out as being healthier than those around them and it is assessed as safe to do so[4].

Country specific general tree and woodland (forestry) management information and guidance is available for:

- England[5]
- Wales[6]
- Scotland[7]
- Northern Ireland[8]

Ash Dieback Toolkit

An Ash Dieback Action Plan Toolkit has been produced by the Tree Council[9].

It is a resource that has been specifically designed to assist Local Authorities and other regional or local agencies in taking effective action to address the risks and resource demands from Ash Dieback.

As well as information and guidance, the toolkit provides a four step approach to managing the risks from Ash Dieback:

1. Raising Awareness
2. Preparing an Ash Dieback Action Plan

3. How to take action and respond to Ash Dieback
4. Recovery and Adaption

The aim of the four step approach is to:

— Increase understanding of the implications of Ash Dieback

— Provide a local / regional framework for preparing an Ash Dieback Action Plan

— Work at the county level while being adaptable to any scale

— Provide focus around the tactical issues that an organisation may face while incorporating the need to deal with the strategic impact of tree pest and disease on the wider treescape

It is only by taking such an approach that Local Authorities and other agencies can formulate and implement an effective and adequately resourced risk management action plan.

Summary

Ash Dieback is an increasing risk to many landowners that will most likely result in the loss of most native Ash trees over time. While there is still a degree of uncertainty on just how Ash Dieback will impact our society, it is foreseeable that it will result in a loss of amenity while elevating risk and the costs of managing the situation. Due to the prevalence of Ash trees in parks, roadside verges, and rail embankments, there is a direct risk to human welfare which needs to be considered and addressed.

References

1. RHS, Ash dieback, available here: https://www.rhs.org.uk/disease/ash-dieback
2. Woodland Trust, Ash Dieback, available here: https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/tree-pests-and-diseases/key-tree-pests-and-diseases/ash-dieback/
3. BBC, Ash dieback: Exploding diseased trees risk lives – experts, available here: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-60929266
4. UK Government, Managing ash dieback in England, available here: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/managing-ash-dieback-in-england
5. Forestry Commission, available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/forestry-commission
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7. Scottish Forestry, available here: https://forestry.gov.scot/
8. Northern Ireland Government, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Forestry and the environment, available here: https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/forestry/forestry-and-environment
9. The Tree Council, Ash Dieback Action Plan Toolkit, available here: https://treecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Tree-Council-Ash-Dieback-Toolkit-2.0-2.pdf

Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

Get in touch

For more information, please contact your broker, RMP risk control consultant or account director.

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