

Asian beetle eradicated, city says

Thousands of hardwood trees felled to eliminate voracious pest

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The Asian long-horned beetle has been eradicated from Toronto, officials are cautiously declaring as they finish a massive tree-cutting effort to remove the pest.

"We're cautiously optimistic," said city forester Richard Ubbens, explaining that the thousands of trees that had to be cut down to eliminate the bug will have all been reduced to a fine mulch by the end of this month.

The beetle is a voracious pest that kills maple species and other hardwoods. After it was discovered in Toronto last September, some experts said it could have destroyed about half of Canada's hardwoods if not dealt with immediately.

Working alongside city crews, a total of 36 separate contractors have removed more than 15,000 trees from areas in the northwest part of the GTA since cutting began in November, Mr. Ubbens said.

"It is quite a large number. It's much larger than we anticipated back in October [before cutting began]," said Howard Stanley, a project officer with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which is overseeing efforts to deal with the pest.

Saying he had initially anticipated that crews would have to cut somewhere between 5,000 and, at the absolute maximum, 10,000 trees, Mr. Stanley said the scope of the infestation continued to grow as crews advanced through the affected areas and found more trees that had to come down.

Mr. Ubbens said there would have been far more had the beetle not been detected last fall.

"By all accounts, what it looks like is that this thing was starting to go to an exponential population growth stage, and it seems that we just got it in the nick of time.

"Based on what we've seen, there would have been a lot more of them this year laying a lot more eggs. We're very, very fortunate that we caught it when we did."

The other good news, he said, is that the bulk of the cutting -- some 13,000 of the 15,000 trees taken down -- was done in an industrial area between Finch

Avenue and Highway 407, concentrated near Highway 400, and not in areas with ravine ecosystems and well-developed urban forests.

The other main area of cutting was in an area of Ansley Grove, where 1,500 to 2,000 trees had to be cut down, Mr. Stanley said.

The other three areas of known infestation, however, were left virtually untouched.

Only about eight trees had to come down in the Beechwood cemetery at Jane Street and Highway 407, none of which were the memorial trees that some had feared might be removed.

In Thistletown, an area of Etobicoke bordering a heavily wooded ravine, and itself lined with towering maples, only four trees were cut down, Mr. Ubbens said.

At a community meeting last fall, residents in that neighbourhood were told that crews may have to cut all trees capable of hosting the beetle for up to 300 metres from any site where the pest was found.

It was an unsettling prospect for many, and a horrifying one for John and Sheila McIlraith, who feared they would lose most of the trees from their one-hectare property.

"I'm passionate about trees. I've planted them everywhere I've lived. It's just my nature," Ms. McIlraith said last October as she toured her wooded property. "I'd hate to think of this being the last fall when we see all these lovely colours."

On Friday, Mr. Ubbens said the couple's trees have been saved, and will likely remain standing because extensive surveying has revealed the infestation in that neighbourhood to be so new it would have been almost impossible for the beetle to have spread beyond the four trees it had already infested.

While that comes as welcome news to Mr. McIlraith, he wants to wait until he knows for sure before setting his mind at ease.

"We're not out of the woods yet," he said yesterday. "The inspections might very well go on for another three or four years. If they do find new infested trees, that will raise the danger of needing to cut."

Both Mr. Ubbens and Mr. Stanley confirmed this, saying they have moved into an intensive surveying effort that could last for at least a couple of years. "If anything is found, of course, we go back into an immediate removal operation," Mr. Ubbens said.

But he pointed out that the trees in the known infestation zones have been inspected and re-inspected several times in the past months and he is "hopeful" every infested tree was dealt with.