

MEDIA RELEASE

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ONE MILLION HECTARES OF WA'S SOUTHWEST INFECTED WITH DIEBACK

More than one million hectares or 10,000 square kilometres of Western Australia's unique southwest is infected with Phytophthora Dieback, a major study has found.

The study is the first of its kind to map the extent of dieback infestation in WA and shows that of the 5 million hectares surveyed from Enneabba to Esperance, one million is already infected and at least another million is at high risk of infection.

The findings from the four-year long study were released in Perth today.

Manager of Project Dieback Joanna Young said "Phytophthora Dieback was destroying plant communities throughout the southwest, an area recognized internationally for its biodiversity value."

Phytophthora dieback is an introduced soil and water borne micro-organism that kills by destroying the root systems of plants.

Dr Young said "there was an urgent need to take preventative action to stop any further spread of dieback."

"We are looking at an area recognised internationally as one of the world's most important biodiversity hotspots and we are losing it by the day to an introduced pathogen," Dr Young said.

"Nearly 80 per cent of the plant species in southwest WA are found nowhere else in the world. At least half of those are vulnerable to dieback."

Dr Young said of major concern was the impact of dieback on the state's iconic banksia species.

She said an estimated 24 species of banksia were threatened with extinction as a direct result of phytophthora dieback.

Grass trees were also especially vulnerable to dieback.

“Five million hectares of remnant bush and the conservation estate has been assessed for dieback occurrence using on-ground observation, aerial photography and remote sensing.

“The project team estimates that in the order of one million hectares have been infested by phytophthora dieback in the wetter areas of the south-west.”

She said many national parks including the Stirling Range National Park were already so riddled with dieback that their future was uncertain.

“Some south coast plant species will only survive in the wild if the Fitzgerald River National Park remains free of extensive Phytophthora dieback infestation,” Dr Young said.

She said dieback posed a greater threat to the state’s biodiversity than the cane toad and urgent action was needed to slow its spread.

“This is a major environmental disaster and it is occurring right now.”

Dr Young said areas of the state could be saved from dieback if preventative action was taken immediately.

“There is currently no known cure for Phytophthora Dieback. Recovery from disease impacts is costly and in some cases not feasible. The best method we have is to protect areas of bushland not currently infected,” Dr Young said.

Project Dieback was funded by the Federal Government’s Natural Heritage Trust through the South Coast Natural Resource Management Group. It has worked in conjunction with the Department of Environment and Conservation and local governments.

The project has produced a series of maps depicting the extent of dieback that will be used as tools in the fight to stop its spread. It has identified significant areas of remnant vegetation that are dieback free and can be protected and has compiled a list of all native plant species susceptible to Phytophthora Dieback.

Statement Ends

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