

It's inevitable: Invasive pest will arrive in Nebraska, kill ash trees, costing an estimated \$960M

By Nancy Gaarder / World-Herald staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, March 11, 2015 1:00 am

An invasive pest that could wipe out a significant chunk of Nebraska's tree canopy is on the state's doorstep.

While an emerald ash borer hasn't been discovered in Nebraska yet, an infestation is inevitable and is expected to cost residents, businesses and state and local governments an estimated \$960 million.

Lincoln Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks says cash-strapped Nebraska communities need state funding if they're going to get ahead of the emerald ash borer. She's sponsoring legislation to funnel \$3 million annually into fighting it. The proposal faces its first test at a hearing Thursday.

An imported pest, the ash borer is fatal to native ash trees because they have no defense against it, said Eric Berg, community forester with the Nebraska Forest Service. The nature of the infestation also makes the dead trees a near-immediate safety hazard. Within about two years of death, the ash trees become brittle and prone to breaking apart, Berg said.

A confirmed colony has been discovered within 100 miles of Omaha in Creston, Iowa, and infestations have been found in the Kansas City and Lawrence, Kansas, areas. Colorado also has a confirmed detection.

An army of volunteers and public and private tree specialists has been watching for the insect in Nebraska, and what's surprising is that it has yet to be discovered, said Berg, who believes it's already here. Nebraska communities have been working with the state's forest service to count, map and prioritize ash trees for removal or treatment.

For Nebraska there will be stunning losses, Berg said. Many trees struggle to thrive in this prairie state, but ash, a native species, is one of the exceptions. Because ash dominates the landscape, some



They're coming ... Invader will kill ash trees-showcase

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communities will lose up to 40 percent of their public tree cover in the decades ahead, Berg said.

Berg said the forest service based its \$960 million estimated impact of the borer on the cost of tree removal, disposal and replacement. The estimated cost breakdown is \$270 million for state and local governments and \$690 million for the private sector.

Legislative Bill 461, Pansing Brooks' proposal, would set aside money to help local communities remove and dispose of ash trees, as well as replace the lost trees. She said she expects the bill to face a tough road — it will be competing against a host of other needs for state dollars. The bill has picked up one co-sponsor, Al Davis of north-central Nebraska, and faces its first test at an Appropriations Committee hearing at 1:30 p.m. Thursday in Room 1003 in the Capitol.

A somewhat similar measure for \$3 million has begun working its way through the Iowa Senate. Detections in Iowa have surged in the past year. Since the start of 2014, the number of Iowa counties with known emerald ash borer populations has jumped to 19, up from three, according to Kevin Baskins of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

Shannon Ramsay, founding president of the Iowa-based group Trees Forever, said the rapid spread of the borer across Iowa is fueling pressure on legislators to act. She said she's optimistic that the state will provide money to help cities.

In Nebraska, the momentum to do something is coming from Lincoln. In addition to Pansing Brooks' sponsorship of the bill, the City of Lincoln is working with the League of Municipalities and other communities to secure state funding. Lincoln officials will be among those testifying in favor of the bill Thursday.

"The big issue for communities will be the high cost," said Nicole Fleck-Tooze, special projects administrator for Lincoln Parks and Recreation. "By the time you've detected it ... you're already behind. It becomes a life and safety issue."

Jack Cheloha, the City of Omaha's lobbyist, said the city will testify in favor of the bill.

Typically within about eight years of discovery, some 80 percent of a community's ash trees are dead, Berg said. The forest service expects the infestation to first spread through eastern Nebraska and along the Interstate 80 corridor.

In Lincoln, there are about 14,000 ash trees on public property, in Omaha, about 11,000 trees, Berg said. There is probably double to triple that number on private property in the two cities, he said. Based on experiences in other states, the communities can expect nearly 100 percent of untreated ash trees to be dead within 15 years of the insect's arrival, Berg said.

Under the Nebraska proposal, the money would be provided to local governments as matching grants on a 50-50 basis. In Iowa, the Senate is considering a revolving loan program.

“This is one disaster we can get ahead of, to a certain degree,” Berg said. “It’s going to happen, we know it’s going to happen, we’ve seen it in 24 other states, we’ve got a chance to be a little prepared.”

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Correction: An earlier version of this story had an incorrect date for the appropriations committee hearing on LB 461. The meeting is Thursday at 1:30 in Room 1003 in the Capitol.