

**Press release**

**24 January 2011**

**UK landscapes could be at risk of another major tree epidemic, say researchers**

We have to be more willing to pay for control measures or risk serious consequences for our familiar landscapes and gardens, according to researchers carrying out investigations for the UK Research Councils’ Rural Economy and Land Use Programme.

Social and natural scientists have been looking back at the outbreak of Dutch Elm Disease that ravaged the UK in the 1970s and considering the implications for our natural heritage today.

Tree diseases that have already reached our shores in recent years include *Phytophthora ramorum*, also known as Sudden Oak Death, and the closely related *Phyotophthora kernoviae*. The team has concluded that these types of pathogens have the potential to kill large numbers of trees across a wide range of species, with serious consequences for heritage gardens, rural landscapes and the horticultural trade.

They have identified fundamental lessons that need to be learnt, and make some important recommendations for key groups involved in biosecurity.

In particular, they suggest that government agencies and third sector environmental groups could give more attention to the threat that invasive diseases pose to biodiversity, and use their influence to raise the awareness of both policymakers and the public. The latter would help to ensure that gardeners and tourists visiting gardens become more conscious of the dangers of cross-infection and the precautions that they should be taking.

Diseases tend to come into the UK via imported plants and the researchers say we need to acknowledge the difficult trade-offs that will need to be made between freer trade and effective biosecurity.

Dr Clive Potter from Imperial College London who led the research said: “European legislators have a part to play, as well as the UK Government and a wide range of stakeholders, in tackling this growing problem.

“There is a need for a more critical and interdisciplinary analysis of the underlying causes of the growing threat to biosecurity, and of conflicts between those advocating further market liberalisation in the context of the Single European Market and those arguing for restrictions on trade in the interests of biosecurity

“In a more general sense, we also need much more public debate about the threat from tree diseases in relation to other, better recognised environmental challenges like climate change.

“Valuation surveys from our research suggest a lack of public awareness and this translated into an unwillingness to pay for control measures. Public awareness needs to be raised, not only in order to establish a stronger sense of personal responsibility for preventing the spread of plant diseases, but also to elicit more support and a greater willingness to pay for any more restrictive measures and policies that may be necessary in the future if we are to avoid another epidemic like Dutch Elm Disease.”

More details of the research may be found in the Rural Economy and Land Use Programmes’ [Policy and Practice Note no 25.](http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/policy%20and%20practice%20notes/25%20Potter/PPN25.pdf)

Notes for editors:

1. The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme is an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), with additional funding provided by the Scottish Government and Defra. See [www.relu.ac.uk](http://www.relu.ac.uk) for more information about the Relu programme.
2. See Relu’s [Policy and Practice Note no 25](http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/policy%20and%20practice%20notes/25%20Potter/PPN25.pdf) for more information about the research findings.
3. Imperial College London is a science-based institution with a reputation for excellence in teaching and research that attracts 14,000 students and 6,000 staff of the highest international quality. Innovative research at the College explores the interface between science, medicine, engineering and business, delivering practical solutions that improve quality of life and the environment - underpinned by a dynamic enterprise culture [www.imperial.ac.uk](http://www.imperial.ac.uk).
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