

Yew trees attract national attention

Demand for bark arouses concerns

By June Russell
Emerald Reporter

Conservation, economic opportunities and the value of biological diversity are just a few of the issues raised by the discovery and rising demand for the anti-cancer drug taxol in Pacific yew tree bark.

Long considered a "weed tree" by timber harvesters and the U.S. Forest Service, the yew is rapidly becoming a valuable marketable commodity, with the potential to bring researchers and economic opportunities to Lane County.

"There is an indication that there are red hot opportunities appearing for research and economic development," said Lane County Commissioner Jerry Rust. "Our forest products industry is clearly diminishing. To turn this molecule into research jobs and dollars is what the new research park is all about."

Rust said researchers from the Chicago and San Francisco Bay area have already contacted him and expressed interest in relocating their laboratories in Eugene, in what Rust describes as the heartland of yew country.

The economic opportunities created by the sudden marketability of yew tree bark is not lost on forest service officials. Spurred by the interest in the yew tree from researchers and bark harvesters, the forest service is undertaking research of its own to learn more about the yew and possible sustained yield harvesting.

"We are doing more inventory, looking at more possibilities of harvesting," said Patti Rodgers, public affairs specialist

for the U.S. Forest Service in the Willamette National Forest.

"Suddenly there is a desire and demand for harvesting yew. We're taking a look at how that harvesting is happening. We're also looking at cultivation. At this point we're looking at a number of 'maybes'," she said.

Ignorance, logging practices and the destruction of the yew's habitat, Rust said, are responsible for the steady decrease in the native yew population. With the increasing demands from researchers for taxol, that decrease translates into supply problems and rising conservation concerns.

"It is intertwined with the debate over national forests," Rust said. "It appears the yew tree is one of the most sensitive trees in the forest. When you destroy its habitat, as in clear-cutting, it just disappears. It's pushed to the brink of extinction in Europe."

The National Cancer Institute discovered the anti-cancer uses of taxol, a chemical extracted from the yew bark, during tests run on over 35,000 species of plants beginning in 1958.

The success of clinical trials started 1981 using taxol on ovarian cancer cells has led researchers to make plans to test the drug on 31 other cancers, including cancers of the lung, breast and colon.

Increased research, however, means an increased demand for limited supplies of yew bark.

This has Rust and other conservationists concerned, and afraid the yew population may be irreparably depleted or made extinct.

Inherent to the supply problem is the minute amounts of

taxol obtained from each yew tree, and the tree's slow rate of growth.

The preferred tree for harvesting is over 50 years old, creating a long wait even if harvested trees were immediately replaced with seedlings, Rust said.

The bark of three to six of these trees is needed to produce 200 milligrams of the drug, enough taxol to treat a single patient. Some 2,000 to 4,000 trees are needed to produce a kilogram of taxol; last year 60,000 pounds of the bark were harvested to yield 2.5 pounds of the drug. Every year some 12,000 women in the U.S. die from ovarian cancer.

These numbers worry conservationists, who are organizing on behalf of the yew.

Ten environmental organizations sent a petition September



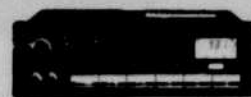
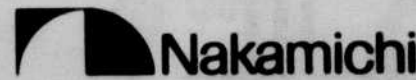
Photo by Andre Ranieri

Lane County Commissioner Jerry Rust is concerned about the fate of the northwestern yew tree.

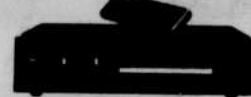
19 to Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan, asking that the yew be listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

Among those supporting the petition are the Oregon Natural Resources Council, the Environmental Defense Fund and National Wildlife Federation.

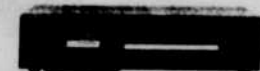
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