

Aphids: This year ‘is significantly the worst I’ve ever seen it’

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This year, Colvin said, “is significantly the worst I’ve ever seen it.”

‘Piercing-sucking mouthparts’

Spruce aphids — “soft-bodied insects with piercing-sucking mouthparts,” according to the horror-movie description from Oregon State University — look similar to the lime-green aphids people see on their rose bushes. They are an invasive species and range on the West Coast from California to Alaska.

Clatsop County’s spruce trees may look terrible now, but there is good news. If a tree is not too far gone, it can be saved or even recover on its own.

This week, Colvin sent out a mass email to Arbor Care clients with information about what might be happening to their spruce trees. Gearhart City Manager Chad Sweet, who was noticing issues with trees around the city, posted the information on the city’s website.

The men are concerned people will want to start removing infested trees prematurely, believing the trees are dying or already dead.

The aphids mass in colonies on spruce tree species and feed on sap in the needles. Infestations can be most severe on the Sitka spruce, a coastal tree, according to the Oregon Department of Forestry.

As the aphids feed, a tree’s needles turn from green to yellow, then to a rusty brown. Entire branches of a tree might die. The damage isn’t usually apparent until the aphids have already



Katie Frankowicz/The Astorian

Aphids can damage spruce trees, like this one in Seaside.

moved on.

An infestation may cause banks of older needles to drop prematurely, but aphids typically leave buds — the soft, bright green tips that signal new growth and appear on spruce trees in May and June — alone.

Gearhart plans to work with an arborist to nurture impacted trees in parks, along street right of ways, by Neacoxie Creek and along the city’s Ridge Path Trail.

“We want to protect (the trees) as best we can,” Sweet said. “They’re a big part of Gearhart.”

The best way to treat infested trees is to take action long before aphids ever show up. For now, Colvin recommends boosting the health of trees by watering them during the summer months. Soaps can be used

to slough aphids off young saplings, but will not work for large trees or commercial stands.

The most effective way to inoculate trees is to use insecticides, which is not an ethical option when bees are active, Colvin said. Insecticide treatments need to wait until the fall.

A difficult conundrum

It’s a difficult conundrum for people concerned about insecticides, Colvin admitted, but there are no real effective biological means to control spruce aphids.

“So do you want to stick to your guns of no pesticides ever and let a huge percentage of the large, historic Sitka spruce die because of it? It’s kind of a toss-up,” he said. “What do you do?”

People who opt for insecticides should make sure they’re working with someone who is specifically licensed to use the product, he added.

The Sidlos asked Colvin to take a look at the trees in their yard Wednesday. They aren’t sure what they want to do about the aphids he found. The health of nearby Neacoxie Creek is important to them, Angela Sidlo said.

She is contemplating what other trees they could plant if the spruce do not recover or continue to suffer from aphid infestations.

“To tell you the truth, we’re kind of lacking in our management options in terms of what to do,” said David Shaw, a professor at Oregon State University.

Spruce aphid population booms detonate in the winter and early spring — at times

when there are few insect predators like yellow jackets or wasps around to keep their numbers in check.

Shaw, who is based in Corvallis, has been in contact with Greenwood Resources about issues the forestry giant is seeing on timber holdings in Clatsop County and elsewhere. He hopes to make a trip north soon to conduct his own investigations.

“With the symptoms we’re seeing, I’m confused whether it’s something in addition to spruce aphid that’s happening, particularly something associated with the drought we had in 2018,” he said.

Clatsop and Columbia counties, as well as a large portion of Tillamook County, are abnormally dry right now, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Like Colvin, Mark Morgans, area manager of Greenwood’s Lewis & Clark Timberlands, is concerned about what his foresters are seeing. But he’s not ready to start waving red flags.

Aphids have come in cycles before and Greenwood is hoping to weather this one, too.

Sitka spruce timber is considered a lower-value product, but it has become a desirable species for export in the past decade. The aphids are banqueting on important needle banks the trees use to capture sunlight and store carbon. Trees hit heavily by the insects may end up stunted.

But the aphids are nearing the end of what is usually their active stage, Morgans noted. If there is any silver lining, it’s that the aphids dined on last year’s growth.

The trees are putting on new growth now.

The spruce Greenwood has used to replant harvested stands for the past decade were intended to withstand onslaughts from a different insect pest. These trees appear to be more resistant to spruce aphids, as well.

Foresters are looking at how increased sunlight in stands might create less desirable environments for aphids. They are considering heavier thinning work on young spruce stands.

The timber company replants with a diverse mix of tree species to mimic historic forests, a move that means entire stands aren’t wiped out when pests like spruce aphids show up.

For now, aphid issues on the timberland appear to be limited to pockets along highway corridors and at lower elevations, said Kathryn Olson, an area forester with Greenwood. Foresters first started noticing brown Sitka spruce several weeks ago in stands near Cannon Beach.

“At this point, our main goal is to monitor the extent, so we know and we can watch it,” Olson said.

Up until this year, Colvin would have said humans are the usual culprits when it comes to threats to trees. Construction and development can compact tree root zones or restrict a tree’s ability to access water. Installing underground utilities can sever tree roots.

“Humans are by far the worst infestation for trees,” Colvin said. “Urban human activity is the No. 1 cause of tree death.”

And now? “Maybe the aphids felt left out.”



Katie Frankowicz/The Astorian

Stuart Emmons, a Portland architect, is vying for a job as Astoria’s community development director. He met with city leaders and residents at a meet and greet on Wednesday.

Director: Department has long been juggling large projects

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She previously worked her way up through the city planning and building division in Cortez, Colorado. She handled a little bit of everything and said she is comfortable with both the small and larger tasks that come with a planning job.

“Whatever comes up that’s important to the community, that’s what I work on,” she told the crowd.

Emmons lived on the North Coast for several years in the late 1970s, running a wood shop out of Hammond. In Portland, he has been involved in a variety of large and small planning and building projects for the city as both an architect and a planner. He worked on two big waterfront plans, neighborhood planning and a strategic plan to address homelessness, among other projects. He has also made two unsuccessful bids for the Portland City Council, running most recently in 2018 on an affordable housing and homeless platform.

Affordable housing and homelessness are two issues he has tried to address throughout his career. His firm has been working on modular shelters in Seattle most recently.

In his work with Portland, he found that a lot of reports and visioning plans he worked on “ended up on a shelf and nothing happened with them.”

Where the city has plans,

he wants “to make sure if we want to do something that we do it and that reports don’t just sit on a shelf.”

Whoever is hired will take over a department that has long been juggling multiple large, complicated projects while short-handed.

The department is working on code amendments and updates, as well as the implementation of new codes which involve complicated questions about what should be allowed on the waterfront. The department is also heading up a long-term community planning project in the historic Uniontown area.

Regular day-to-day permit activity continues to be high, according to a quarterly report Estes included in a City Council meeting packet on Monday.

Kevin Cronin left the community development director post in October 2017.

Estes, himself a former community development director for the city, took over as interim director and supplemented staffing needs in the department through a series of consultants, such as former planners Rosemary Johnson and Mike Morgan.

This spring, city planner Nancy Ferber left for a job with the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce. Building official Tony Clifton’s job has just been posted as available on the city’s website.

Trial: Wilkins’ sentence will be decided in June

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David Rich, an attorney who represents Wilkins, said he had made attempts in the past for Wilkins to enter a guilty plea, but was unable to reach an agreement with prosecutors and the judge that wasn’t dependent on Copell.

“My issue for many months was that this never should have gotten this far,” Rich said.

Wilkins’ sentence will be decided at a hearing in June. No sentencing deal was agreed upon between the state and the defense, but murder in the first degree carries a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years.

Copell, however, is still standing trial.

Prosecutors intend to

prove that Copell — who has claimed she was sitting in the driver’s seat of the motor home at the time of the alleged murder — is guilty of murder and of abuse of a corpse by stuffing Vinge in a bag and throwing him down a hill.

In opening statements, Senior Deputy District Attorney Scott McCracken outlined the state’s timeline of events. McCracken described how Vinge welcomed Copell and Wilkins, who were homeless, to stay with him in his motor home in a Newport RV park.

At the time, Copell and her partner helped Vinge take care of projects, like fixing up the car they eventually drove to Arizona, in exchange for food.

The state brought in mul-

tiple former neighbors of Vinge, who testified he was a kind and reserved man, with several health issues.

One day, the three left the RV park apparently unannounced, driving north and eventually up to Astoria. The state alleges Vinge was murdered in the motor home, dying from blunt force trauma from being hit by a piece of driftwood.

After allegedly wrapping up the body and leaving it on an embankment near the John Day bridge, McCracken described how the couple then sold Vinge’s collectible coins and items at a pawn shop in Longview, Washington.

“They sold his walker for \$5,” McCracken said.

Alexander Hamalian, an attorney who represents

Copell, characterized the defendant as a flawed individual held captive by a lifetime worth of physical, mental and substance abuse.

The defense argues Copell lived in fear of Wilkins, following his orders and direction.

“Like a dog who has been beat, she’ll tell you what happens when she doesn’t do what she’s told,” Hamalian said.

While conceding Copell played a role in helping Wilkins, the defense claims Copell was merely a shocked bystander as Wilkins bludgeoned Vinge.

“The evidence is going to show she has been with a man like (Wilkins) all her life,” Hamalian said. “That doesn’t make her a killer.”

Data center: Cox hopes to bring forth another proposal

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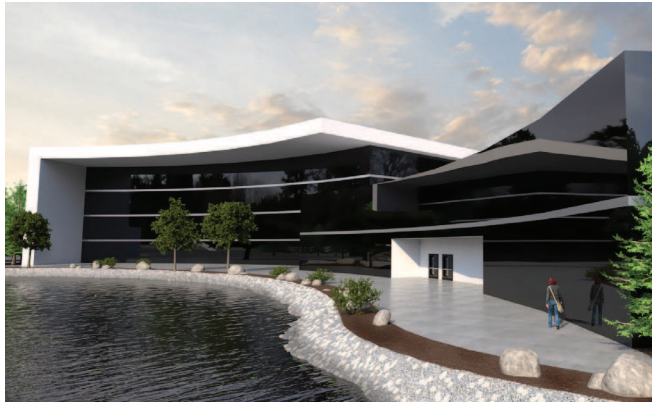
sought 67 acres at the county-owned business park. The proposed campus, across from Costco on 19th Street, would have included a nearly 100,000-square-foot data center and technology incubation space.

Agile Design has been doing due diligence on the property since August, and has received multiple extensions since being awarded the original \$1.2 million purchase and sale agreement.

In April, the company asked the county to extend the agreement one day past a Tuesday deadline, explaining that more facts had become known about how to address wetlands mitigation.

But the monthslong deliberations made some on the commission want to step back and reevaluate how development at the business park should be approached.

“I think that we have realized that the North Coast Business Park as presently developed is inadequate to be a business park,” Commissioner Pamela Wev said after the meeting. “A business park by definition has



Agile Design

Mark Cox has proposed a new data center and technology incubator in Warrenton.

infrastructure, utilities, zoning, certain expectations ... and we realized that that doesn’t exist. So we need to regroup and perhaps pursue cleaning up this mess.”

Wev has expressed her concerns about development at the business park in the past, calling for the county to step back and do a master plan for property. She believes the land will be more attractive to developers if the county does more to solve the long-standing wetlands issues.

Wev also said she took issue with the proposal because she felt Agile Design was asking for too much money from the county’s indus-

trial revolving fund, which helps with infrastructure improvements to support development.

“They were asking for us to be joint partners with them,” Wev said.

Cox said he and his team were disappointed by the decision, but hope to bring another proposal to the county commission.

“We understand the motion that was on the floor was whether or not to accept or decline this proposal that was set before the commissioners,” Cox said. “They have declined to accept this particular proposal, we are therefore hopeful that we could put together a future proposal that they might

be more willing to stand behind.”

Cox believes part of the commission’s decision was based on concerns about the project’s timeline.

“A decision needed to be made and we were very specific about what we wanted to accomplish in a particular timeline in the proposal, and I think that was a big part in their decision,” Cox said. “They may have felt uncomfortable with that, but from our perspective, it was necessary to ensure the highest probability of success for the project.”

Charles Conrow, who is working with Cox on the data center, added that the due diligence process introduced “more variables” into the equation — largely related to wetlands mitigation — which added more complexity into a new purchase and sale agreement.

“It’s not simply, ‘There’s the land, this is the price’ ... there are things that have to be worked through on both parts to get to a successful conclusion,” Conrow said. “We tried to lay that out in this purchase and sales agreement and that path was too quick and too much of a commitment to make a decision on tonight.”