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NEWS

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Yellowing Pine Needles Normal in Autumn

Fort Collins, Colo. – Although thousands of evergreen trees throughout Colorado are beginning to display dying yellow, red or brown needles, most are simply going through a natural shedding process – and are not infested by bark beetles or tree disease.

“This needle cast, or shedding, usually starts in late summer and early fall with the change in seasons and weather. Needles will continue to be shed throughout the fall and into winter, usually aided by frosts and wind events,” said Ben Pfohl, assistant district forester at the Colorado State Forest Service Boulder District.

Every autumn, many Colorado conifer tree species shed some of their older, interior needles as part of an annual growth cycle. Needles on the lower portion of the crowns or closest to the trunk are most commonly shed, but trees stressed due to drought or root damage may shed more needles to keep the tree in balance with its root system. Soon-to-be shed needles typically turn yellow first, then a reddish-brown color before dropping off weeks to months later; very small branches with few needles on them also may die.

In Colorado, conifer species that commonly shed needles in the fall include ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir and Colorado blue spruce.

Evergreen trees that shed fall needles have a different appearance than trees infested by bark beetles. The needles on a beetle-infested tree typically change color throughout the entire tree, initially starting with an off shade of green and turning to reddish-orange by the following summer. In addition to changing needle color, bark beetle-infested trees will show other signs of attack, such as fine sawdust at the base of the tree.

The seasonal discoloration and loss of pine needles frequently is called “needle cast,” but the term also refers to an unrelated fungal disease of spruce and fir trees.

For more information about tree and forest health, contact your local district forester at <http://csfs.colostate.edu/pages/your-local-forester.html>.

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