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NEWS

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Yellowing Pine Needles Normal in Autumn

BOULDER, Colo. – Although thousands of evergreen trees along the Front Range are beginning to display dying yellow, reddish or brown needles, most are simply going through a natural shedding process – and are not infested by bark beetles or tree disease.

Ben Pfohl, assistant district forester at the Colorado State Forest Service Boulder District, says that the shedding of needles usually starts in late summer or early fall and continues into early winter. In the CSFS Boulder District, which includes Boulder and Gilpin counties, conifer species that commonly shed needles in the fall include ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, limber pine, Douglas-fir and Colorado blue spruce.

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.

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 or popcorn-shaped masses of resin on the trunk.

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

For more information about tree and forest health, contact the CSFS Boulder District at 303-823-5774 or visit <http://csfs.colostate.edu/districts/boulder-district>.

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