Solutions sought for infected oaks

■ **Trees:** Insect infestation on rise in common local species

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A growing insect infestation has endangered the fates of many willow oak trees throughout the District, according to recent research by nonprofit Restore Mass Ave.

The group, which focuses on Massachusetts Avenue NW, recently carried out a pilot project on 12 Embassy Row oaks — treating the trees with acephate injections, which suppress infection in much the same way a vaccine might treat the human body. The D.C. Urban Forestry Administration, responsible for the city's street trees, is also investigating the extent of the problem and the most environmentally responsible treatment options.

At issue is the oak lecanium scale, an insect that extracts sap from an oak's vascular system to thrive. This weakens the tree and can eventually lead to premature death. William Eck of Bartlett Tree Expert Co., project manager of the Restore Mass Ave pilot, said he has also seen severely infected trees on MacArthur Boulevard, Lowell Street, Loughboro Road and some streets near the Navy Yard.

"On some of those streets, [wil-

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low oaks are] planted almost exclusively," he said. "If you drive up MacArthur Boulevard, you have all those trees arching over from both sides that could be afflicted."

About 26 percent of the approximately 130,000 D.C. street trees are oaks, said city arborist Kasey Yturralde.

In mid-August, Eck injected 12 street trees along the 2500 block of Massachusetts Avenue NW in hopes of zapping the critters at the most vulnerable stage of their life cycle. He said their numbers have only recently spiked to problematic levels.

"Until it reaches a damage threshold, there's no treatment needed," said Eck. "But if you look at all the trees now, they're pretty much at that threshold."

The insects live for about a year. Upon hatching in early summer, the parasites latch onto leaves before settling on twigs from late fall through the spring. Female scales then hide thousands of new eggs before they die the next summer, and the cycle continues.

Eck said pesticide spray tends to be a more popular treatment option but that injections target scale more selectively. An injection works for several years before scale populations reaccumulate, according to his research. Restore Mass Ave is asking residents to commission a tree-service firm like Bartlett should they discover infected oaks on or near their properties.

Yturralde commended the group's efforts but noted that many property owners may be unwilling or unable to conduct similar projects on their own dime.

"Collaboration is always great," she said. "But one thing to keep in mind is that funding for that collaboration depends on homeowners and isn't going to be possible across the city."

Yturralde said the Urban Forestry Administration would need to assess the scale's abundance relative to the rest of the local ecosystem. "The thing is that these scale are also a food source for other organisms," she said.

The city does not traditionally treat local oaks for scale and found that the trees have been able to withstand levels of infestation in past years despite minor defoliation. Currently, the only pathogen treated by urban foresters citywide is Dutch elm disease, carried by beetles. However, Yturralde said her agency has already reported the scale increase to the U.S. Forest Service, which has provided grants for a more comprehensive study.

The city study would nail down more specifics and inform an "evidence-based" approach. Before employing insecticide injection, the agency will need to determine whether it could harm desirable insects. Alternatives like horticultural oil and soapy water may better protect human health as well, according to Yturralde.

"That's great if it works," she said. "But we want to know more about the scale and the risks they pose to the street trees before we do a whole treatment plan."