

Ash dieback: ministers accused of 'hiding inconvenient truths'

Written by Darren

Wednesday, 14 November 2012 10:37 - Last Updated Wednesday, 14 November 2012 10:40



Ministers have been accused of "hiding inconvenient truths" about the spread of the deadly fungus threatening Britain's ash trees.

The criticism stems from changes made to the "scientific facts" published by the government about ash dieback, which emphasised the role of the wind in spreading the disease over the role of infected trees imported from continental Europe. Ministers can do nothing to stop the wind blowing spores across the country, but have been attacked for taking too long to ban the import and movement of infected ash trees.

The original government document stated: "Wind-blown spores may be dispersed up to 20-30km . Longer distance spread occurs via infected plants or potentially via wood products." But an additional sentence was inserted on 9 November: "On occasions, spores may disperse much further on the wind." The Guardian understands this is not supported by any published scientific research, but was agreed at a recent meeting of forestry researchers convened by Prof Ian Boyd, chief scientist at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

A Defra spokeswoman admitted the document had been altered without the change being highlighted: "When this document was updated to better reflect the scientific consensus on wind-borne dispersal, the explanatory text [to note] the changes was not updated due to an administrative error. This has now been rectified."

"What I really object to is that you get the best science presented one day, but when you poke and prod that, the science changes," said Mary Creagh, Labour's shadow environment secretary, who met Boyd last week. "Ministers are leaning on government scientists to hide inconvenient truths about the disease. It is another sign that scientists are under pressure from incompetent ministers to make the science fit the policy, not the policy fit the science, just as we

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saw with the badger cull."

The Green party MP Caroline Lucas said focusing blame on the wind was "politically convenient".

On Friday, the environment secretary, Owen Paterson, acknowledged it would be impossible to eradicate ash dieback from Britain. He said the best hope was to slow the progression of the disease while searching for ash strains which have natural genetic resistance to the *Chalara fraxinea* fungus. Paterson and the Conservative party declined to comment on the changes to the scientific facts document.

But during a debate on ash dieback on Monday evening, the Lib Dem environment minister David Heath told MPs he would not take part in a "blame game". He said: "Those who wish to peddle conspiracy theories can do so. We will get on with dealing with the disease."

Boyd had explained the hypothesis that wind dispersal was responsible for the arrival of spread of ash dieback on Friday, saying weather models for recent years suggested there had been "a number of days when a plume of spores [travelled] across the UK". He also noted that infections in wild trees, as opposed to those linked to infections imported into nurseries, are very concentrated in the south-east of England, the nearest region to continental Europe. Most wild infections are in Kent and East Anglia, but there are at least seven wild sites much further north and as far as Edinburgh in Scotland. Infections linked to imports are spread right across Britain.

Boyd said computer modelling to examine the wind hypothesis had not been carried out and might be a waste of resources: "I always tell my students, if a pattern looks statistically significant, it is statistically significant." On preventing the spread of ash dieback through wind-blown fungal spores, Boyd said: "We can do nothing about that."

Ministers have been criticised for being slow to act, after the Horticultural Trade Association asked the then Labour government to ban ash imports in 2009. However, at that time scientists believed the fungus causing ash dieback was already endemic in the UK, meaning no ban was possible. In 2010, the year the coalition government took power, scientists realised that the deadly fungus was in fact a similar but distinct species. The first British case of the disease was confirmed in February 2012 in a tree imported from the Netherlands to a nursery in

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Buckinghamshire. Ash tree imports were banned on 29 October.