Written Question

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

1. What recent estimate she has made of the rate at which Phytophthora Ramorum is spreading

   a) nationally and

   b) in the South West.

James Paice (Minister of State (Agriculture & Food) Environment, Food & Rural Affairs)

Since the first detection of Phytophthora Ramorum in Sussex in May 2002, a systematic programme of surveys has been carried out by the Food and Environment Research Agency and the Forestry Commission covering nurseries, garden centres, woodland and other sites in the wider environment, with action being taken to destroy infected plants that posed a risk of further spread, especially Rhododendrons.

While the disease caused by the pathogen has spread, and is now found in much of the south-west of England and Wales, occasionally in other parts of the south of England, and to a much lesser extent in Scotland, the rate of spread and the intensity of infection has been slowed by the action taken.

In August 2009, the pathogen was found for the first time in Japanese Larch, a commercial forestry tree species, at sites in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset, and surveys have found a number of further sites where trees have been infected. These surveys have intensified and are ongoing, supported by aerial surveillance by helicopter. Infected sites totalling around 1,850 hectares have been found in Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and in South Wales. The evidence suggests that all of the woodlands that have been found with dead and dying Larch could have become infected as a result of a weather event causing aerial spread, possibly in 2008. The extent of subsequent spread is still being investigated.

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