

Blister rust threatens to destroy Tahoe's sugar pines

By Kathryn Reed

Orange tinged pine needles signal a tree that is likely to be a skeleton of itself in a couple years. If standing, it will be a dead gray stick of sorts.

White pine blister rust is killing three species of pines found in the Sierra – sugar pine, Western white pine and white bark. With less than 5 percent of sugar and Western white pines having a natural resistance to the fungus, these trees could one day be extinct.



Sugar pines are often more than a foot long.

The Sugar Pine Foundation is attempting to do what it can to prevent them from being wiped out in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

John Pickett founded the nonprofit in 2004. His wife, Maria Mircheva, is executive director. Tressa Gibbard is development coordinator. The trio relies on a wealth of volunteers to further the cause of saving the sugar pine.

Gibbard recently spoke to Soroptimist International Tahoe Sierra about the foundation's efforts.

“Blister rust goes from pines to rag weeds to pines. It would not spread if there were no rag weeds,” Gibbard explained.

In the short video the group saw it says 45 percent of the trees on Barker Pass are infested with pine blister rust, while the percentage is 40 on Dick’s Pass.

Pickett, in the film, talks about the billions of dollars spent on attempts to improve the clarity of Lake Tahoe, but wonders why no money is being spent by the states and feds on what is going on in the higher elevations.

He said fewer trees absorbing groundwater means more will flow downhill – and faster. It will contain fine sediment that clouds the lake. Other impacts to the ecosystem would also naturally occur if a species of trees were killed off.

What the foundation is doing to save the sugar pine species is climbing trees each September to harvest cones from the trees that have a natural resistance to the rust. Then the U.S. Forest Service, Pickett’s former employer, grows them into seedlings that can be planted throughout the region.

This spring a group of South Tahoe High School students is slated to plant seedlings in the Angora burn area.

The first plantings by the foundation were in 2008. Gibbard said more than 30,000 seedlings have been planted since then, with the anticipation of 10,000 more going in the ground this year.

Besides volunteering to plant seedlings, people can also become members of the foundation. Details about that and other aspects are on the Sugar Pine Foundation’s website.

Sugar Pine Foundation events:

- March 24: Maria Mircheva and John Pickett will give a talk at Explore Tahoe in Heavenly Village in South Lake Tahoe, 6pm

- April 16: South Lake Tahoe Earth Day at Bijou Park, 10am-4pm
- April 23: Tahoe-Truckee Earth Day at Squaw Valley, 11am-5pm
- April 30: Community Planting in the Angora Burn off Mule Deer Drive, 10am-noon (weather permitting).