FOREST NEWS
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The Clock Is Ticking for Georgia's Hemlocks

By Wayne Jenkins: Executive Director

Time marches on in its plodding, inexorable way and usually we are resigned to the fact, though perhaps a bit uncomfortable about it. After all, like the weather, there seems to be little we can do to about it. In the case of our native evergreen hemlock trees, time is not only moving on but also, running out.

As many Georgia ForestWatch members know, we are facing the virtual extinction of our native hemlocks by the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, across the tree's range in north Georgia -- perhaps in as little as the next decade. The miniscule exotic insect, which silently sucks the life out of this beautiful evergreen tree, showed up in the Chattooga watershed in 2002 and has been hopping westerly across the mountains, hitchhiking on the feet of small woodland birds, most recently appearing in Jarred creek in the upper Toccoa River watershed. So far, the pest has been found in the aforementioned Chattooga watershed, the Tallullah watershed, the Brasstown Creek area, Coopers Creek and now the upper Toccoa area. To date adelgids are yet to be found in the Noontootla Creek area, Mountaintown Creek or the Cohutta mountains but its most likely just a matter of time before the adelgids' cotton-like masses appear on the undersides of hemlock boughs across the hemlocks entire range in our state.

The loss of our hemlocks has been compared to past man-made eastern forest eco-disasters on the scale of the Chestnut blight, the gypsy moth infestation and Dutch Elm disease but little is certain about what will happen, especially to our cold mountain streams and rivers, which hemlocks benefit with their cooling shade. As anyone who has lived in north Georgia for the past ten-to-twenty years will tell you, things have been warming up. If this trend continues and many of our cold water streams lose the significant shading provided by hemlocks, some believe these streams will be significantly impacted by a rise in water temperature affecting crawfish, salamanders, trout and other aquatic species. Mountain streams will most likely receive increases in silt as the bank holding hemlocks succumb. Hemlock associated bird species such as Blackburnian, Black-throated green and Swainsons Warblers, Veery, Wood Thrush, Winter Wrens, Blue-headed Vireos, Louisana Water Thrush, Redbreasted Nuthatch and a suite of other birds will most likely suffer from the loss of

hemlock stands. Black Bear, Bobcat, Red Squirrel, Red-backed vole and the Water Shrew are mammals also associated with Hemlock forests. It is obvious that we are now witness to a historical natural event of monumental proportions with unknown but potentially devastating consequences.

Since the accidental introduction of the adelgid into the eastern United States around 1950, hemlock stands covering almost half of the tree's natural range in the east have been severely affected. The states of New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsyl- vania and Virginia have all sustained heavy infestations with the Shenandoah National Park suffering up to 70% mortality in some areas. North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Great Smokey Mountains National Park and now Georgia are facing the same grim results from the tiny bug with the enormous appetite. In many of these states, State and Federal agencies are working in various degrees on two fronts to combat the adelgid; chemical insecticidal treatment for saving trees in the short run and 'biological control' or the introduction of predatory beetles that prey exclusively on the woolly agelgid for long term control. Though some of the latest observations in the northern hemlock stands which have undergone treatment the longest appear promising the verdict is still inconclusive as to the overall permanent success of these efforts. But, as James Sullivan, Georgia ForestWatch District Leader, Board member and agelgid field researcher for the Georgia Forestry Commission remarked recently, "We know what will happen if we do nothing. We will lose our beloved hemlock trees!"

Here in Georgia the leadership of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests has recently released an initial plan for dealing with the adelgid for public comment and input. Initially however, there appears to be a huge problem. After a careful review and discussion with forest service personnel and the few laboratories producing the specific predatory beetles for release into infested stands of hemlock, it appears that other than the on-going beetle program in the Chattooga watershed of extreme eastern Georgia, there will be no beetles available for treatment of the many other adelgid impacted stands in north Georgia. This situation should be a call to action for all natural resource agencies in the state, the Forest Service, every conservation organization and yes, every citizen from the Governor on down. Our beloved north Georgia forests are under a full scale assault of historical proportions and for the cost of building less than one quarter mile of interstate highway, (estimated in 1996 dollars at about a million dollars a mile) we could be well on our way to developing the fully functional predatory beetle lab we need now and for the future. This is a call to arms! Georgians, save your hemlocks! Call your federal and state leaders. Tell them they must get involved. Discuss the plight of our stately hemlocks with your neighbors, relatives and co-workers.

We can find the resourses needed to do everything possible to fight this problem that threatens to devastate our mountain forests. And then, if we fail, we can tell our children and our grandchildren we cared enough to give it our best. Let's do this!

The clock is ticking. _