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BIISC
BIG ISLAND INVASIVE SPECIES COMMITTEE

New Rapid ʻŌhiʻa Death infestation confirmed in North Kohala district of Big Island

Rapid ʻŌhiʻa Death (ROD), a disease that has killed hundreds of thousands of native ʻōhiʻa trees on the Big Island, has been confirmed in North Kohala. While the deadly fungus has been spreading throughout Puna, Hilo, and Kona since 2012, this is the first time the fungus has been found in the island's northernmost district.

Officials from the ROD working group, comprised of representatives from state, federal, and private organizations, are in the process of implementing a response to the discovery made on September 15, 2017. According to the working group, of ten samples collected at the Kohala site, eight have tested positive for *Ceratocystis* species A. This is the more virulent of two newly identified fungal species causing the rapid decline in ʻōhiʻa. The Big Island Invasive Species Committee (BIISC) and the Kohala Center's Kohala Watershed Partnership (KWP) program are leading the response efforts. According to William Buckley of BIISC, whose team is responsible for early detections and rapid response to ROD, crews will be collecting more wood samples from surrounding trees and studying insect activity to determine next steps.

"After this round of sampling, we'll know a lot more about the extent of the infestation and whether or not insects are an issue here," said Buckley. "There are a lot of factors to consider – for instance, will felling the tree wound other trees nearby, potentially opening healthy trees up to infection? Management actions rely heavily upon science, so we are working with the scientists to get a better understanding about what they're seeing."

Scientists with the ROD Working Group have found that a few introduced species of ambrosia beetle are especially plentiful and attracted to dead and dying ʻōhiʻa trees. The fine sawdust produced by the beetle's drilling activity can be carried on the wind. The possibility of wind-borne fungus is among the main concerns for disease spread.

"More sampling will tell us which insects are present and whether or not boring beetles are producing a lot of potentially wind-borne [sawdust]," explained Dr. Curtis Ewing, entomologist with the ROD Working Group.

Researchers are concerned about the potential for spread of the disease from this new location to other islands, which have not yet had any detections of ROD. Flint Hughes, a forest ecologist who has been working on ROD since it was first discovered in 2012, warned, "This detection was found 33 miles from the nearest infestation site we had previously found. Maui is only 40 miles away from there. It is critical that we do everything we can to learn more about this disease and how to stop it."

ʻŌhiʻa is the keystone species of the Hawaiian forest, and the trees are considered critical to the ecology of Hawaiʻi and to the function of Hawaiian watersheds. ʻŌhiʻa is also prominent in Hawaiian culture and plays an important role in traditional and religious practices.