

UK plant health authorities identified sweet chestnut blight (*Cryphonectria fraxinea*) at orchard sites in Warwickshire and East Sussex in late autumn 2011. They waited five months to inform the industry then said virtually nothing until May 2013.

The flashpoint is in Sussex and neighbouring Kent where the vast majority of Britain's sweet chestnut coppice grows. *C. parasitica*, like *Chalara fraxinea*, is a fast moving, spore-spreading fungal pathogen. A lot of golf courses have some sweet chestnut trees but those around the Sussex and Kent Weald often have large tracts of sweet chestnut coppice woods as important integral components of the course landscape. There is nothing 'sweet' about chestnut blight. It is a killer disease just like *Chalara ash dieback*.

No news could be good news but tucked away in a recent Forestry Commission (FC) statement is: "a trace-forward exercise has identified a small number of infected trees delivered to a further seven locations in England." Never mind the 'small' numbers - one infected tree will produce thousands of spores!

Other utterings suggest FC could be about to confirm the disease is already in the wider environment. Given the ease and speed of blight spread in North America and Europe this is the mostly likely scenario.

FC say are following their



disease outbreak contingency plan and developing a strategy for a longer-term response.

Infected material planted in Warwickshire and East Sussex was sourced from the same nursery in France but FC continues to prevaricate.

Sweet chestnut imports from EU countries are subject to plant passporting and since January 2013 are scrutinised by plant health inspectors.

However, FC admits a latent infection phase can still allow diseased plant stock to slip through.

If so, why have EU imports not been subject to a sufficiently long period of plant quarantine (observed isolation) before planting in UK soil, or better still banned just like all *Castanea* imports from non-EU countries? Even risking the importation of sweet chestnut infected with such a fast spreading and aggressive disease is mind boggling.

DEFRA has finally called for a ban on sweet chestnut imports from infected countries.

Environment Secretary Owen Paterson announced the

intention at the government supported "Stop the Spread" garden at RHS Chelsea Flower Show. A six-week consultation is underway with expectation of a ban before the autumn planting season, although EU regulations could still thwart these plans.

On past performance I can't help thinking this sudden flurry of interest and activity in sweet chestnut blight is a softening up exercise and a prelude to the government announcing blight is here to stay.

Dr Terry Mabbett

BIGGA SCOTLAND TRIUMPH (BUT ONLY JUST!)

It didn't look promising for golf to be played as the weather was quite nasty in the morning but thankfully the annual match against the Scottish Section of the GCMA went ahead at Douglas Park Golf Club on Wednesday 8 May.

Although a strong team from the region was assembled, the GCMA managed to win 5 points to our 4 following the completion of the day's play. However, the region managed to retain the trophy thanks to a walkover result for the final game. The board would like to thank all members of the team for taking part.

On accepting the trophy, chairman Andy O'Hara (shown left with Derek Scott) praised the course manager Drew McKechnie for the excellent presentation of the course on the day particularly considering the weather.

