When sudden oak death (SOD) was discovered in Oregon in 2001, the disease was widespread in California but limited in occurrence in Oregon to an isolated area in Curry County. Since the detection of SOD there, state and federal natural resource agencies and Oregon State University Researchers have been working cooperatively to accomplish four goals: contain the infected area in Curry County, eradicate the disease from that area, learn more about the disease, its biology, and how it spreads, and prevent the reintroduction of the disease into the state.

According to officials at the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA), the eradication efforts in Curry County are making good progress. They have apparently prevented spread outside of the initially infected area and reduced the extent of that infection substantially. In Washington, SOD made what government and industry officials hope was only a temporary appearance in the state during June of 2003. A shipment of plants from outside the state was found to be infected with SOD. The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) believes that occurrence was contained and eliminated.

SOD is, however, still a hot topic in Oregon and Washington because of the constant threat of reintroducing it from outside state boundaries and the potentially devastating impact on the region’s woodland and forest ecosystems and timber, nursery, and Christmas tree industries. Thought to have originated in Europe, the disease was first discovered in the U.S. in 1995 in California where it continues to change the face of woodlands, forests, and landscapes. It seems to have the potential to do the same in Oregon and Washington. The disease is known as Sudden Oak Death because it was first discovered on dead tanoak trees, a species that is closely related to true oaks. It also affects many species of true oak and a growing list of native and ornamental shrub and tree species. Oregon oak, the type of oak found in the Mid-Columbia region, belongs to a group of oaks that appears to be resistant to SOD.

Besides having lethal effects on certain oak species, a partial list of tree and shrub species on which the disease has sub-lethal effects includes bigleaf maple, California honeysuckle, Pacific madrone, manzanita, wild and cultivated rhododendron, California buckeye, Oregon myrtle, California coffeeberry, and toyon. Recently, Douglas fir and coast redwood have been added to the list of native species susceptible to the disease. Additionally, numerous ornamental shrub and tree species are capable of harboring the disease creating the potential for spread.

Sub-lethal effects include a range of less severe disease symptoms such as leaf spots or twig blights. Many other pests or diseases cause SOD-like symptoms on most SOD affected plants. It is nearly impossible, therefore, to diagnose the disease solely based on field observations. Positive identification requires laboratory culturing or testing.
Since the detection in Curry County, no new occurrences attributable to natural spread have been detected in Oregon. SOD has been in the news recently, however, because of detection on ornamental nursery plants imported into the state (from the same source of the infected plants in Washington). This introduction occurred despite the existence of federal and state quarantines that control interstate and intrastate movement of potentially infected plant products. Because of repeated incidents of this kind, government and industry officials in Oregon decided that additional measures were necessary.

A new emergency rule went into effect in August 2003 that requires all recipients of tree and shrub nursery stock imported into Oregon from all out-of-state sources to notify the ODA for possible inspection of the plants. The new rule specifies that nurseries and retailers must contact ODA no later than two days following arrival of the shipment. ODA will respond within one business day following notification if the nursery stock needs to be held for inspection. In the mean time, the imported tree and shrub nursery stock must not be sold or distributed to untraceable buyers, such as final consumers, for one business day after notifying ODA. The new rule is designed to locate any new introductions of SOD before infected plants reach other nurseries or consumers. This seems to be a logical approach because ODA officials believe that the previous introductions of infected nursery stock came from out-of-state nurseries and were not part of an established infestation of sudden oak death in Oregon.

There is still much to learn about the origin, spread, and ultimate impact of SOD. Nobody is sure how or why this disease emerged where and when it did. It is clear that the effects have far reaching implications for forest and woodland resources, as well as the commercial nursery and landscape industries, in Oregon and Washington. Everyone can help prevent the spread of this disease by complying with the quarantines and new emergency rule. These include restrictions on the movement of nursery and forest products, including firewood, from any infested areas including parts of Curry County and much of California. For details on these restrictions contact the ODA Plant Division (503-986-4762), or WSDA (360-902-1800).

In Oregon, plants suspected of having SOD should be reported to the Oregon Department of Agriculture Invasive Species Hotline (1-866-INVADER). In Washington, contact the WSDA. For more information on SOD in Oregon and elsewhere, visit the Oregon Department of Agriculture website at http://www.oda.state.or.us/.