Advance of the fungus: Managing tree health in Afan forest

The Afan forest extends for 12 miles along the Afan Valley and adjoining valleys. Most of the forest was first planted with conifer crops in the 1950's and 60's with further planting in the 1980's. These plantings were mainly of larch and pine on the lower slopes and elevations, and spruce on the upper slopes and higher elevations.

Phytophythora ramorum is a fungus-like pathogen which causes extensive damage and mortality to a wide range of trees. In the past four years, over 650 hectares of larch have been felled in the Afan valley, which equates to well over 15% of the forest area. Approximately 230 hectares of larch remain and will be felled as soon as operationally possible. The outbreak of *Phytophythora ramorum* across Wales, not just at Afan, has been the largest outbreak of a tree disease in Great Britain since the Dutch-elm epidemic in the 1970's.

It has required a huge amount of planning and resources to achieve the level of felling required at Afan and work is still ongoing. We have also had to work with the forestry sector to support the sale of increased quantities of larch in the marketplace.

Sadly, the felling has taken its toll on the visual, landscape and amenity aspects of the valley but these will recover in time. The saying "every cloud has a silver lining" does hold true at Afan. We are trying to make the most of what has happened by implementing changes that will make the forest more resilient to future threats.

We consulted the local community about our proposed changes to the Forest Design Plan and they made several recommendations including increasing broadleaf cover, providing permanent viewpoints across the valley, reducing clearfelling, planning for more seasonal colour mixtures, enhancing geological features and increasing recreation and tourism opportunities.

Through an increased tree restocking programme, we are working to get Afan back on its feet as quickly as possible. We are planting a wider range of species, including broadleaves, to improve the diversity of the forest and improve habitat connectivity. We are also retaining some crops that may have been considered for felling sooner if *Phytophthora ramorum* had not infected the larch, to improve the visual appearance of the valley and support recreation.

Pursuing SMNR: