

Fla. braces for pines' hurricane die-off

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Environmental officials in South Florida are waiting to see if native slash pines will begin dying off in a delayed reaction to Hurricane Wilma in October.

Months before Wilma swept across the southern peninsula on Oct. 24, horticulturalists began noticing hundreds of pines yellowing and dying quickly during the summer.

Palm Beach County officials first feared the slash pines were fading from an insect epidemic, but a University of Florida entomologist's investigation found the slash pine deaths to be a delayed reaction from hurricanes Frances and Jeanne in 2004.

The 2004 storms' winds rocked the native Florida pines, causing invisible damage to roots and the tissue under the bark, John Foltz, a University of Florida entomologist told the South Florida Sun-Sentinel.

Jamie Caston, a county environmental supervisor said it is "kind of a wait-and-see" situation regarding whether Wilma will cause a similar pine toll. The 2004 storms had already killed many of the county's weaker pines, Caston said.

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