

Immanuel Lutheran College Summary of Forest Management

February 17, 2009

As early as the late 1990s we began losing oaks and by the early 2000s we became aware of the oak wilt disease. In our research for solutions, we found that the city of Eau Claire required abatement of these public nuisance trees and also had ordinances in place for oak maintenance. We were determined to follow these laws.

After further research and many discussions with the Wisconsin DNR, we concluded that the city's ordinances were not aggressive enough to stop the spread of this disease. In 2004 we developed our own oak wilt management policy, which went beyond the city's requirements.

At this time we sent letters to the neighbors bordering our campus, advising them of our policy with the hope that they might address the problem on their properties. Unfortunately, since many of our neighbors live in the Township of Washington, they are not required to follow the Eau Claire ordinances. Some of our neighbors did take steps to stop the spread, while others left wilted trees standing, allowing the disease to spread.

In 2004, as part of our program of abatement, we installed multiple, root graft barriers in an attempt to contain the infected pockets. However, the wilt continued to spread underground. We tried to stem the spread by inoculating some of our trees, but they eventually succumbed to the disease anyway. Meanwhile, due to overland spread via insects, the infection was appearing in other areas of campus. Reports were coming in of pockets of oak wilt throughout the community.

Although red oaks are the most susceptible target of the disease, we sadly observed white oaks, also, succumbing to the disease. It became apparent that we were not able to contain the spread of oak wilt. We faced the prospect of the annual removal and disposal of many trees.

Besides the frustration of watching our trees die, the labor and expense involved with this problem was robbing our school of resources which could have been used to improve the operations of ILC. This method of management of the disease was proving to be a greater burden on time and finances than we could afford. Moreover, we realized that, if it spread through our woods, our neighbors would be affected.

In 2006 we brought in a certified arborist to make recommendations to the College. By this time we had lost approximately 110 trees. His recommendation was to harvest the oaks after consulting with the DNR. He further recommended that a selective harvest of the other species also be done. This would prove helpful to the overall health of the forest.

Since the forest has a good mix of other hardwood species, including but not limited to Hackberry, Ash, Basswood, and Maples, the hope for regeneration is good. It should be noted that there has been harvesting done in this forest in past years and it has replenished.

The DNR was again contacted and given the recommendations from the arborist's report. The DNR recommended that we manage the areas around buildings on a tree by tree basis and that the oaks on the lower campus be harvested. It was suggested that other high risk and unhealthy species be removed from our woodlands, also. This included trees that had reached the end of their lifespan, trees that were severely damaged by the 1980 wind storm¹, and trees affected by other diseases.

At the recommendation of the DNR that we use a consultant forester to set up the sale of timber, in 2007 the Board of Regents authorized a contract with A&K Forestry Consultants to manage the harvest.² By this time we had lost over 200 trees. Our goal was to complete this selective harvest during the winter of 2007-2008 in compliance with the oak wilt policy we adopted in 2004.

In order to avoid encroachment on our neighbors' properties, we contracted with Hiess-Loken to survey our property. Letters were sent to our bordering neighbors informing them of our decision to mark the property and selectively harvest our woodlands. Signs were placed at the survey markers as well as in the line of sight between the markers.

Although there was some interest, A&K Forestry failed to get any bids on the harvest. Most loggers prefer a summer harvest, but we were adamant about doing this in the winter, so as to minimize the risk of spreading the disease to neighboring properties (in the winter the fungal pathogen and insect vectors are inactive). Another hindrance to the loggers was the access limitation on the south side of our property.

In 2008 we took out a permit with Eau Claire County to build a drive accessing our land off of County F. A&K Forestry was then able to find a logger that would be willing to complete the harvest in the desired time period.

The harvest is completed and has received many reactions. Those who have never seen a tree harvest would not have known what to expect. It surely is a dramatic and sad change for all to see, for our neighbors as well as ILC residents and visitors. However, we are trying to look past the initial, short-term shock and realize that the best thing for the forest is to manage it. We have neglected the forest for years; now we intend to move forward in the management of our woodlands. Such plants as Buckthorn and Honeysuckle need to be controlled or they will take over in place of the regeneration we hope to obtain. Oak trees that sprout from the roots of those harvested will be thinned out so each tree has a better chance at water and sunlight.

The woodlands, with scattered non-oak species, initially has been left looking very barren. However, decay of the slash, when it is within 2 feet of the ground, is fairly quick. Within a few years the small limbs will be decomposed, returning needed minerals and nutrients to the soils. In the meantime, the slash serves to protect seedlings from browsing deer and other woodland creatures. The regeneration of oaks, white pine, jack pine and other species will soon hide most of the negative visual effects of logging. Given 5 years or so, it will be hard to see the logging residuum except for stumps. (The stumps will serve as a sprouting source for new trees.) White pines will sprout very well, since the over story is removed. Any seed white pines will soon

1 The storm of 1980 devastated our upper campus. It was only in connection with this harvest that we learned how much it had devastated the lower campus. Even the logger was stunned.

2 This is a DNR Cooperating Forester (<http://dnr.wi.gov/forestry/Private/assist/coopfor.htm>).

produce a carpet of young pines. This will help limit site distance through the stand and cover much of the slash. Within two years a good crop of pine seedlings should be present.

This venture has not been undertaken for profit. With the survey, consultants, and roadway, we expect that most of the revenue will be consumed. In addition, future management will also have its expense. However, there is one financial boon: we have saved the many thousands that we would have expended for oak wilt abatement. That money can now be used to improve the grounds and facilities and the education of future students at ILC.

Furthermore, this harvest has now made it possible to begin a responsible plan for the management of the forest. It is our hope that we and future generations will now be able to discover and enjoy our woodlands not only from above, but also from ground level. May the Lord so bless our efforts.

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