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CRATER LAKE

A dying whitebark pine is shown in Crater Lake National Park. The National Park Service is planting disease-resistant varieties to replace the trees that are dying from whitepine blister rust disease. AMELIA TEMPLETON/OPB

How scientists are solving problem of dying trees

Cassandra Profita
Oregon Public Broadcasting

In 2002, Crater Lake National Park ecologist Michael Murray thought the park's majestic whitebark pine trees were as good as gone.

An invasive fungus called white pine blister rust was killing the rugged, long-needle pines that line the rim of Mount Mazama's crater and frame its gleaming blue lake. And there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"The way I see it now, the extinction of whitebark pine in the park is imminent," he told OPB's "Oregon Field Guide" back then. "I expect us to lose about 90% of the whitebark pine in this park — at least."

The blister rust fungus was accidentally introduced to the U.S. in a shipment of infected nursery trees from Europe around 1900. Since then, it's wiped out millions of whitebark pine trees across the western U.S. and threatened the survival of the species.

But Oregon scientist Richard Sniezko saw a way to save these trees from extinction using a method that can also help protect other species.

A geneticist with the U.S. Forest Service, Sniezko told Murray there might be some whitebark pine trees with natural resistance to the blister rust disease. He had already found genetic resistance to blister rust in other pine trees through his work with the Dorena Genetic Resource Center in Cottage Grove.

"At that point in time, back in the early 2000s, very little was known about resistance in whitebark pine," Sniezko said. "It was expected to be one of — if not the most susceptible of our white pine species."

If scientists found genetic resistance in existing trees, the seeds from those trees could be used to grow and plant a future forest that wouldn't be wiped out by blister rust. And Crater Lake's whitebark pine trees could survive.

In 2002, Murray and Sniezko started collecting cones from whitebark pine trees at Crater Lake National Park and testing them at the Dorena lab for resistance to blister rust infection.

One of six sites at Crater Lake National Park where blister rust resistant whitebark pine trees have been planted to replace the trees that are dying from the invasive fungus. The first resistant trees were planted here in 2009. PROVIDED BY RICHARD SNIEZKO

Decades later, hundreds of trees across Oregon and Washington have been identified as having natural resistance to blister rust. Thousands of their seedlings have been planted at Crater Lake — and across the region.

Whitebark pine was listed as a threatened species in 2022, and the trees are still in decline. Other threats still loom for them — like the mountain pine beetle — especially in a warming climate with declining snowpack.

But thanks to decades of trial-and-error genetics work, they're no longer facing imminent extinction, at Crater Lake National Park or across the Northwest.

"Blister rust in many areas will be more a minor nuisance rather than a major problem that threatens the existence of the species," Sniezko said. "It's

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High-tech farming offers new careers

Suzanne Wright
USA TODAY NETWORK

Agriculture is one of humanity's oldest professions. In the United States, it accounted for 10% of total jobs in 2024 according to USDA data. But technology is rapidly reshaping agricultural employment.

"Farming used to be all about horsepower. Now it's just as much about computing power," said Justin Rose, president of John Deere's worldwide agriculture and turf division, small agriculture and turf care.

And that means hiring people who understand both soil and software.

"A lot of people still picture farming as purely mechanical – big machines, dusty fields, long days," Rose said. "But today, we're building artificial intelligence systems that can literally see what's growing in the field and make split-second decisions about what needs attention."

Daniel Burrus, technology futurist and head of Burrus Research, is also bullish on the sector.

"We're no longer guessing about the future," he said. "The data is there, and when we combine it with human ingenuity, we can pre-solve problems before they happen. The next generation is using technology as a tool for stewardship of the land, the water and the communities that depend on agriculture."

And that's attracting talent.

"The narrative that agricultural careers are limited to field work is outdated," said Elaine Millar, associate vice president of research at Gray Decision

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New movie from horror icon set in fictional Oregon town

Ginnie Sandoval
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Bruce Campbell may be best known for chainsaws and chaos, but his latest film "Ernie & Emma," leans into something more real.

"It's almost like you have to have this disclaimer of, 'Warning: No chainsaws! Danger: No blood!'" Campbell said.

The actor is widely known for his cult-favorite role as Ash in the Evil Dead franchise and his frequent collaborations with director Sami Raimi.

For his latest venture, Campbell wrote, produced, directed and starred in "Ernie & Emma," a project he completed in southern Oregon with the help of his wife, Ida Gearon.

The story follows Ernie Tyler, a former small-town pear salesman in the fictional town of Pear Valley, Oregon, as he navigates grief, memories and the possibility of moving forward after the death of his wife. It is a departure from the high-energy, horror-driven roles Campbell is known for.

The movie premiered Feb. 14 at Medford's historic Holly Theatre and is set for another screening April 4 at Portland's Hollywood Theatre.

Campbell spoke with the Statesman Journal ahead of the film's latest screening. He touched on the creative process, the movie's theme and his

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