What we're doing about Summer Branch Drop

We're taking a reasonable, proportionate, and reasonably practicable approach

This Note explains what Summer Branch Drop (SBD) is and how we're going to manage the risk from it. Looks at the overall risk. Then reviews what we currently know and don't know about SBD.

Unless a tree has a history of SBD the risk is Acceptable

SBD is a very loose term to describe branches on mature trees that have no obvious defects but unexpectedly fail after a period of hot dry weather.

If we have a tree that has a history of SBD, we'll manage that risk to an Acceptable level

If our trees don't have a history of SBD, then even at the times of year when it's most likely to occur the risk is Acceptable. That means there's no need to reduce the risk any further. If any of our trees have a history of SBD then we'll manage that risk to an Acceptable level.

The facts about the risk from SBD

The risk from SBD is mind-bogglingly low

Compared to other everyday risks that we readily accept, the overall risk from SBD is mind-bogglingly low. From the data[1] [2] we do have, the annual risk of death or serious injury is less than a one in one hundred million.

What we do and don't know

There's no agreement about what SBD is or what it's called

Perhaps because the overall risk from SBD is so low, it's not been very well researched. There's no agreement about what SBD is, or even what it's called - it's also known as Sudden Branch Drop and Sudden Limb Drop. It's often used as a catch-all term to describe branch failure when wind or extensive decay don't appear to be an obvious explanation.

There's no agreement about the critical factors that trigger it

In the published literature the causes of SBD are not agreed or clear[3] [4]. Amongst these, there's no agreement about how hot and dry it needs to be, and for how long; or if humidity plays a role. Whether the branch has to be horizontal or what length it needs to be. What time of day it it's likely to happen, and if rain is required. And even whether the branch has to be defect free to qualify.

Species profiling and a lack of obvious defects

Many tree species can suffer from SBD

In SBD literature, it's been recorded on the following species; Ash, Beech, Cedar, Corymbia, Elm, Fig, Eucalyptus, Giant Sequoia, Horse Chestnut, Liquidambar, Oak, Pine, Plane, Poplar, Silver Maple, Sweet Chestnut, Tree of Heaven, Willow. There's probably more not yet recorded.

We can't tell which branches will or will not fail from SBD

The branches that might fail because of SBD on trees that don't have a history of it lack obvious defects. That means it's not possible for an arborist to tell the difference between branches that might have a high likelihood of failure from those that have a low likelihood of failure.

Conclusion

There's no need to reduce risks that are already Acceptable

The risk of SBD from our trees is Acceptable if they don't have a history of it. If any of our trees have a history of SBD then we'll manage that risk to an Acceptable level.

Further Information

1. National Tree Safety Group – Risk Research
2. Deaths From Tree Failure Database – Australia
3. Sudden Branch Drop: A Case for Closer Inspection
4. Summer Branch Drop – Arboricultural Research Note