



Threat: New research shows dieback has become a serious threat to banksias and other native plants.

Dieback 'rampant' on south coast

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The deadly plant disease dieback is wreaking greater havoc than previously thought on large areas of national parks near the south coast.

New research has found it is threatening to become a bigger problem than the devastation it has caused in the jarrah forests.

A two-year Department of Environment and Conservation study focusing on the Fitzgerald River and Stirling Range national parks has found the pathogen that causes the disease can adapt its behaviour to native plant communities.

It also found climate change could speed up the spread of

dieback. "Extreme weather events such as summer rainfall linked to northern cyclonic activity can lead to a significant spread of dieback and a mass collapse in native vegetation communities," DEC senior research scientist Chris Dunne said yesterday.

About 2300 of 5700 flora species in southern WA are susceptible to dieback and the disease is considered a major threat to the State's biodiversity.

The findings come less than two weeks after the Perth Region Natural Resource Management group found dieback had infected almost one-third of native trees in Perth's outer suburbs, with gardeners

unwittingly spreading the disease from infected potting mix and pot plants. The highly invasive disease is caused by *Phytophthora cinnamomi*, an introduced soil-borne pathogen that kills plants by attacking their root systems.

It spreads through water, soil and plant tissue.

Up to 80 per cent of the Stirling Range, sand plains and jarrah forests are already infected, with devastating results for native bush.

"We have found that the pathogen, though originating from tropical rainforests in South-East Asia, is well adapted to cause high impact in these national parks," Dr Dunne said.