



A plant nursery forced to destroy 50,000 ash trees is suing the government for failing to block imports of the tree sooner. Simon Ellis, managing director of Crowders Nurseries in Horncastle, Lincolnshire, said the Horticultural Trades Association wrote to ministers in 2009 warning of a new virulent strain of the ash dieback disease and calling on it to close UK borders.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has reported 52 confirmed cases of the disease.

Ellis told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "They should have taken it seriously at the time. They chose not to and now we have this really dramatic situation and unfortunately, by the sound of it, the ash tree disease has spread throughout the UK."

He added: "Effectively our income stream starts now. This is the season, this is our harvest time so to cut off our income stream – what other course of action can we take?"

"If they had listened to us in 2009 and acted in 2009 we wouldn't have this situation now."

The number of confirmed cases of ash dieback disease is expected to increase as the results come through from a mass survey of trees carried out over the weekend.

The fungal disease is threatening to wipe out the majority of Britain's ash trees. It has already killed up to 90% of ash trees in some areas of Denmark.

Plant health experts have been undertaking an urgent survey of 1,000 sites that have had saplings from nurseries where the disease has been found to be present.

The environment secretary, Owen Paterson, convened a Cobra crisis committee on Friday to examine the latest developments and co-ordinate action to halt the spread of the disease, which causes leaf loss and crown dieback.

Experts are also expected to gather for a summit in London on Wednesday.

The government banned imports of ash trees last Monday after a programme in which 100,000 specimens have been destroyed since the disease was discovered in March.

But the discovery of the disease in mature trees in East Anglia has raised fears it has blown into the UK as well as arriving on imports and will be hard to control.

Prof Michael Shaw, a plant disease expert from the University of Reading, said the impact could be "catastrophic" and warned it could wipe out 19 out of every 20 ash trees.