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On 16 October 1987 most of Britain went to bed with no idea that the worst windstorm since 1703 was about to hit southern England. As a young tree contractor, I woke to an estimated 15 million trees down and recall working 21 consecutive days without a break - a contracting bonanza. There was three years' work in as many months, but once it was cleared there was no more money or trees to work on, so business dried up quickly. It was the storm before the calm and many went out of business as the country slipped into the 1990's recession.

Now there is another storm, again brought by the wind, but this is much bigger than 1987. Ash dieback disease did not quite have the presence of a hurricane when it first arrived but its potential impact is far more devastating. Though the Government response is gaining momentum, the focus is on woodlands and economic impact rather than managing the risk of public harm. And there is another complication - it seems there may be billions, not millions, of trees within falling distance of people and property.

The simple logistics of dealing with the increased workload will probably mean many dead trees are left standing. The current wisdom coming out of America, which has experienced dead ash trees from another disease (emerald ash borer), is that within a few years of dying, they start to fall over. We know that ash succumbs to decay quickly and a similar trend is likely here.

Its scale makes this a strategic risk management issue, with highway authorities being on the front line because many of these trees are next to roads. Recognising the looming threat, the Arboricultural Association's Conference in Exeter has devoted all of 10 September to exploring tree risk management (see www.trees.org.uk). With dwindling funds as budget cuts bite, and a potential leap in public exposure to risk, there are challenging times ahead.

The risk management time bomb is ticking, but it is a slow fuse and there is still time to prepare.

