



The light brown apple moth may be just another regulatory pain added to the list of pests in the Pajaro Valley.

MediaNews

Inspectors to scour area for moths

Crop loss overseas
attributed to insect

Insects
By TOM RAGAN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

5-11-07

WATSONVILLE — At least 50 federal and state inspectors will descend on Santa Cruz County by next week to help search for the light brown apple moth. And ag officials from countries overseas also will be on hand to help.

The moth, whose reputation for destruction abroad precedes itself, so far has been more of an inconvenience to nursery growers than a financial burden. But ag officials aren't taking anything for granted.

Crops, coolers and packing facilities in the county will be inspected. An emergency command center will be set up at the fairgrounds. And more traps will be laid to determine where the bug is and how best to control its migration, officials with the California Department of Food and Agriculture said Thursday at a special meeting held for more than a hundred nursery growers.

So far, Santa Cruz County has become command central for what could either prove to be a real problem in the agricultural community, or merely another regulatory pain added to the growing list of

Moths

Continued from Page A1

pests that commonly infiltrate the Pajaro Valley.

So far, nearly 75 percent of the 1,900 moths trapped in eight northern and Central Coast counties since late March have been trapped in Santa Cruz County, a good chunk within a 9-mile radius of Soquel. And plant health officials are now struggling with how to disrupt the mating pattern so the male moths can be eliminated.

That's the first step to bringing the moth under control and dismantling federal and state quarantines that have been set up in the past two weeks, restricting movement of cut flowers and nursery crops within 1.5 miles of a moth sighting.

"This thing just descended out of the heavens and onto us. It just showed up and now we've got to control it," said Nick Condos, who's in charge of the quarantine programs for the state Department of Food and Agriculture. "It's a chance we just can't take."

By Wednesday, a dozen experts from New Zealand and Australia, where the moth has caused millions in crop damage annually, will tour some of the infested sites in a few of the eight affected coun-

ties from Monterey to Santa Cruz to San Mateo.

They will then offer their advice on which sprays should be used to eradicate the bug, which likes to feed off of roughly 250 varieties of plants, including fruits and vegetables.

"Is it your feeling we're going to be able to get rid of it or just contain it?" Alan Mitchell, vice president of the California Pajarosa, a rose grower in Watsonville, asked during the meeting.

"We'll see next week," joked Danny Hammond, an official with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Some growers are frustrated because they think the moth may have been in the county for quite some time, and nobody was aware of it.

Generally if the pests go untreated, they're capable of causing up to a 30 percent reduction in crop yield, growers said. There's a chance that growers already are effectively dealing with the moth if such is the case.

Jeff Rosendale, a grower of landscape and garden plants, said he believes much of the panic is due to how California will be viewed overseas at a time when international trade is big.

"It's political saber rattling," he said. "This is turning out to become the al-Qaida of insects."

In Australia, the moth has



County growers listen to officials discuss the local infestation of the light brown apple moth at the County Fairgrounds on Thursday.

Shmuel Thaler/
Sentinel

caused \$21 million in damage annually in Australia, but mostly to apples, pears, oranges and grapes.

California could stand to lose up to \$70 million in a worst-case scenario applied to the same four crops, according to the state agriculture department.

But for now it looks like the nursery crop could be the most affected because that's where the moth's eggs were found a few weeks ago — in a pair of Soquel nurseries whose owners have since sprayed with a special pesticide and eradicated the problem.

Since then, the Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commissioner's Office has paid particular atten-

tion to the cut flower industry, inspecting shipments that have gone out for Mother's Day. But so far no new moths or larvae have been found in the shipments.

Officials told the crowd that they would soon be contacting individual growers and shippers of fruits and vegetables and setting up appointments with them to inspect their shipping facilities and, in some cases, their fields.

"We'll be asking a lot of questions and we're going to need your cooperation," said John Blasius, a senior agricultural biologist with the state.

Contact Tom Ragan at
tragan@santacruzsentinel.com.