

New crop pest on the horizon

By KEITH MURAOKA

Sentinel Staff Writer

WATSONVILLE — Move over gypsy moth; you too, medfly. Even African killer bees are nothing to worry about compared to the newest agricultural pest that soon may threaten local apple crops.

Yes, the Pajaro Valley's pride and joy — apples — could be devastated by the apple maggot, now that the state's million-dollar apple maggot eradication program has been canceled due to an adverse court ruling.

The apple maggot, which entered California from Oregon in 1983, has already spread to six Northern California counties. Local apple growers maintain the door is now open for the bug to spread southward, possibly repeating the 1981 Mediterranean fruit fly disaster.

At stake is the county's \$23-million apple industry, the second largest crop in terms of gross valuation. Apples are first, however, in terms of local acreage, covering 5,500 acres mostly in the south county. The local apple industry accounts for more than half of the state's \$43.6-million apple crop.

"All we can do now is cross our fingers and wait for the inevitable to happen," County Agricultural Commissioner Lenord Craft said this morning. "Namely, eventually the maggot will spread here if nothing is done."

Added county Farm Bureau Manager Jess Brown, "It would be devastating to our area; we're the largest apple producers in the state."

The apple maggot is a two-winged fly, especially hazardous to mature fruit when it is in the larval stage. Young maggots burrow into fruit and can disable a commercial orchard if allowed to multiply unchecked.

Besides apples, maggots are harmful to grapes and cherries, both of which are grown commercially in the county. They are also known to damage pears, peaches and plums, as well as ornamental plants like hawthornes.

According to Craft, the biggest potential problem with any local maggot infestation would be the accompanying quarantine. As with the medfly quarantine, local growers would be prohibited from shipping fresh market apples out of the area without following strict state-mandated rules.

Ironically, those rules include up to six additional spray applications of the pesticide imidan, said Craft — the same pesticide that forced the state Department of Agriculture to end its maggot eradication program.

During the medfly quarantine,

'All we can do now is cross our fingers and wait for the inevitable to happen. Namely, eventually the maggot will spread here if nothing is done.'

— County Agricultural Commissioner Lenord Craft

local growers were forced to absorb the high costs of extra fumigation and longer cold storage periods.

The ruling that ended the state's program came from the First District Court of Appeal in San Francisco, which rejected a state appeal of a Humboldt County judge's order to stop the spraying without first gaining consent of local residents.

The infestation had spread to Shasta, Siskiyou, Mendocino, Trinity, Del Norte and Humboldt counties. The state had been in the process of continuing a \$2.8-million spray and trapping program. A quarantine, however, still is in effect.

"Our biggest problem is man," added Craft. "Even with a quarantine, all it takes is someone to bring an infested bag of apples down here."

Watsonville apple grower Ed Silva maintained a quarantine "could fold us up."

"Growers aren't exactly healthy financially at this time," he added. "We don't need anything else to hurt us."

Silva favors stopping the maggot where it is now. "We know where it is, why not finish the job?" he asked.