

MOTH

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But Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed budget for the upcoming year eliminates the use of state general fund money for light brown apple moth research, inspection and control.

In 2008, the California Department of Food and Agriculture dropped plans to aerially spray counties across the Bay Area amid a public furor, and the population of the moths appears to have increased. Still, there have been no documented cases of significant damage to farms from the moth since.

Environmental groups say state and federal agencies overreacted — and that the decision by California to stop funding the program is the clearest evidence of that yet.

"Five years ago the light brown apple moth was an emergency," said Nan Wishner of Albany, a board member of the California Environmental Health Initiative, a nonprofit that has opposed much of the moth program.

"They couldn't even wait to do an environmental impact report before they sprayed populated areas," Wishner said. "But now, voila! The state cut out the money. There hasn't been any damage. They can't keep the charade going any longer."

FEDS PICK UP FUNDING

The state budget signed by Brown last year chopped California's share of the program roughly in half, from \$1.7 million to \$953,000. It would go to zero under the budget proposal Brown released last month for

the fiscal year beginning July 1.

What the state Legislature is taking away, however, Congress is giving back.

After California cut the program last year, Congress restored the money at the request of the California Farm Bureau Federation, increasing the federal share of the program from \$5.3 million to \$6.1 million this year.

Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, secured the extra money.

He's always been against any aerial spraying, Farr said this week. But he replaced the money to help fund inspection programs that are needed to certify that California fruits and vegetables sold in areas where the moth lives are bug-free so they can be sold to foreign countries and other states.

"Growers of strawberries and other products have to go through extra delay and costs to have the inspections," Farr said. "The money we put in at the federal level was to pay for that."

Farr said his ultimate goal is to convince the U.S. Department of Agriculture to reclassify the moth as a pest of lesser concern. That would mean that the inspections and quarantine areas would no longer be necessary.

State officials, however, insist that the decision to eliminate state funding for moth programs doesn't mean the pest is no longer a problem.

"It's not a statement on the necessity of this program," said Steve Lyle, spokesman for the state Department of Food and Agriculture. "It is a straight budget move, plain and simple, that reflects the difficult budget times the state is facing."

Lyle noted that the idea to cut the funding originated in

the state Legislature.

Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, pushed the cuts.

"To me it was a pretty easy call," said Huffman, a member of the Assembly budget committee. "Despite all of the hoopla about crop damage and other things that were supposed to happen, we have seen zero evidence of significant damage from the light brown apple moth. And frankly, the administration didn't really fight it very hard. They realized this probably wasn't something we needed to be spending our limited money on."

Lyle contends that crop damage still could happen as the moth's numbers grow. He cites the gypsy moth, which was in the United States for years before major damage occurred.

Meanwhile, legal battles over the moth continue.

LAWSUITS

In 2008, after the first round of aerial spraying of a material called Checkmate LBAM-F — a chemical mix containing synthetic pheromones that block the male moths from reproducing — environmentalists and Santa Cruz County sued, saying the chemical was untested and needed more study. A state health investigation found health complaints after the spraying could not be linked to the pheromone mixture.

The state had plans to aerially spray over northern San Mateo County, San Francisco, Marin County, Contra Costa County and Oakland. But judges ordered the spraying stopped until an environmental impact report could be completed.

When the state finally

issued that report last year, opponents, including the city of San Francisco, sued again, arguing it did not adequately study public health issues. That lawsuit is set for a court hearing this spring.

In the meantime, the number of apple moths in Northern California appears to be growing. Between 2007 and 2011, an estimated 86,698 moths were discovered in Santa Cruz County, more than any other county, followed by the counties of San Francisco with 81,829; Alameda, with 49,594; Monterey 35,479; Contra Costa 19,397; San Mateo 15,510; and Marin 11,201.

The state and federal moth program now involves no spraying. It consists of trapping, monitoring and inspections, said Larry Hawkins, a USDA spokesman.

In some counties with light infestations, twist ties containing the pheromones are put on trees. Last month, as a cost-saving measure, the USDA closed a research station in Moss Landing that was breeding sterile light brown apple moths to control the population.

In the most-infested areas, there is no government control work. When necessary, farmers pay for pesticides, Hawkins said.

One remaining question is whether the USDA will keep funding the program.

"California's agricultural economy is significant to the health of the U.S. economy as a whole," Hawkins said. "I think our elected officials will look at that, as they have in the past, and hopefully they'll allocate whatever funding is necessary to support that economic engine."