

Two gypsy moths found; county steps up inspections

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8:30 A

WATSONVILLE — Two gypsy moths have been found in Santa Cruz County within the past week, but county Agricultural Commissioner Dave Moeller says there is no cause for alarm.

The moths, native to the East Coast, are insects with voracious appetites for tree leaves while in their caterpillar stage. In 1985, an infestation was declared in Felton

after seven moths were found. The state began a controversial aerial-spray program.

Moeller responded to the recent finds by placing eight times the usual number of gypsy moth traps within a four-square-mile area of the discoveries. Normally, three traps per square mile are set out, but the department has put out 25 traps per square mile, Moeller said Thursday.

The two moths were found in

separate traps — one in a residential area near Seacliff Beach in Aptos last week, and the other just off Highway 9 in downtown Boulder Creek on Wednesday.

Moeller said there's no cause for alarm, and no evidence that an infestation is eminent.

"There's no real set trigger for an infestation," he said. "We would have to find several moths in a small area over a short period of time, coupled with finding one

or more viable life stages, such as an egg mass or cocoon."

Moeller believes this year's moths probably came from recreational vehicles that passed through the area. Gypsy moths are notorious as "hitchhikers" — hopping onto RV's or lawn furniture strapped onto RV's.

However, Moeller said that last week's Seacliff Beach discovery is cause for more concern since the moth was found just a block north

of the moth trapped last year.

Besides additional traps, the county has begun a daily inspection of traps rather than the standard weekly inspections.

Gypsy moths have been known to defoliate whole forests, Moeller said. While the most concern would be for deciduous trees, such as oaks, apples, aspen and birches, laboratory tests have shown the insects also like redwood, pine and fir trees.