

Officials unsure if spraying will halt gypsy moth infestation

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FELTON — Aerial spraying against the gypsy moth "infestation" here will end Saturday, but agricultural officials feel the spraying will not be successful in eradicating the tree-eating insect.

One state agriculture official — California Department of Food and Agriculture Public Information Officer Gera Curry — told The Sentinel that she fully expects to see the emergence of new moths later this summer.

"I hope it works," Curry said of the state's seven weekly aerial sprayings of a 250-square-mile area of downtown Felton with the non-chemical bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis*. "Because we don't want to be back (in Felton) unless we have to."

Santa Cruz County Deputy Agricultural Commissioner Richard Bergman said simply, "I'm keeping my fingers crossed (that gypsy moths won't be found here this summer)."

State agricultural officials have been outspoken that B.t. alone will not eradicate the gypsy moth. County officials, led by Fifth (San Lorenzo-Scotts Valley) District Supervisor Joe Cucchiara and County Counsel Dwight Herr, have been just as confident the other way — feeling B.t. alone can be an eradicator.

In a landmark decision two months ago,

a Santa Cruz County Superior Court ruled that the insecticide carbaryl has not been proved safe, and prohibited the state from using it in Felton. It was the first time the state, after numerous challenges in court regarding carbaryl spraying since 1978, had been overruled by a local authority. A federal appellate court in San Jose then refused to overrule the decision when the state appealed.

State officials maintain that a two-prong attack utilizing B.t. from the air and carbaryl from the ground is needed in Felton because of the variable terrain and tree cover. County officials and environmentalists disagree, maintaining carbaryl has not been proven safe, citing possible loss of business and contamination of surface water sources from the spray.

"All our evidence is to the contrary that B.t. alone will work," said Curry. "Of course, we're not interested in proving our point. We're interested in eradicating the gypsy moth."

On a personal note, Curry fully expects gypsy moths to show up in Felton later this summer.

According to Bergman, if there are any moths out there, they'll begin hatching from cocoons in July. The county presently has blanketed the Felton area with 49 gypsy moth traps per square mile to detect any presence of moths.

"I won't breath very easily until mid-September, at least," added Bergman.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture has already closed its inspection office in Felton. That office was responsible for enforcing the state's gypsy moth-host material quarantine. The quarantine involved some 300 inspections of mostly recreational vehicles over the last three weeks. State inspectors searched for gypsy moth egg masses in order to prevent the spread of the "infestation."

The state-imposed quarantine began, according to Curry, "because we weren't confident that B.t. alone would do the job." Cucchiara called the quarantine a "harassment tactic."

The state aerially sprayed B.t. seven times in Felton — one more than was scheduled, due to rain on April 20. Curry said the seven times was double any other area in the state was sprayed.

Six moths were trapped in downtown Felton last summer, prompting the state to call the area "infested." Cucchiara, county attorneys and Felton residents have maintained all along that there is no "infestation."

It is the gypsy moth's hairy caterpillar that has the potential for widespread defoliation of forested areas. They are known to attack everything from redwood trees to fruits and vegetables.