

Gypsy moths whipped

By KEITH MURAOKA

Sentinel Staff Writer

FELTON — Residents here are celebrating what they say is a landmark victory for environmentalists, having proved that a non-toxic, non-chemical bacterium could wipe out a formidable gypsy moth infestation.

The state Department of Food and Agriculture has officially declared the voracious moth eradicated. It is the first time in California that gypsy moths have been wiped out using the non-chemical *Bacillus thuringiensis*.

A group of county residents and officials had battled and won a court case to force the state to use B.t. instead of the insecticide Carbaryl.

"There's no question this is a landmark victory for our local community, as well as the entire state," said Supervisor Joe Cucchiara, who represents the San Lorenzo Valley. "This will absolutely change the face of pesticide-eradication, certainly in California and probably throughout the nation."

But the state isn't so sure, still not entirely convinced B.t. should always be used instead of the pesticide.

John Connell, area manager for the state Department of Food and Agriculture in Campbell, called the Felton case "a qualified success" because of several important factors that aided the effort. He was quick to point out that future moth infestations will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis as to treatment.

Both Connell and Santa Cruz County Deputy Agricultural Commissioner Rick Bergman conceded the seven aerial applications of B.t.

over 175 acres in San Lorenzo Valley in 1985 was aided by good luck in terms of fair weather. The lack of rain or wind prevented the B.t. from being washed or blown off foliage.

It has been two years since seven moths were found in Felton, prompting the court battle over the merits of spraying with Carbaryl vs. B.t.

Residents — led by a grassroots organization called People for a Safe Felton — had combined forces with Cucchiara and Santa Cruz County in the fight.

Today, they aren't bashful to say "I told you so" to the state.

"We can now say 'we told you so,' knowing we were right," said Don Haslem, owner of People's Natural Food Store in Felton and a member of People for a Safe Felton. "We've proven that you can fight gypsy moths without chemicals, without poisoning our community. I'm just glad we put up a fight."

Added Larry McNeil, another group member and owner of White Raven Bookstore in Felton: "Since it (B.t.) did work, I guess we can truthfully say that the state's reaction was overreaction. It makes me wonder about all the other eradication programs going on against various pests in the state. It's time to stop poisoning our environment,

using poisons just because they've worked in the past."

The moth's caterpillars are capable of defoliating whole forests. They are a continuing problem in New England and Oregon.

B.t. is a non-chemical bacterium that destroys the lining of the caterpillar's intestinal tract. It prevents the caterpillar from feeding, starving them. Carbaryl, which is sold over the counter as a garden pesticide under the name Sevin, has long been used by the state in its battle against the gypsy moth.

According to Cucchiara, the "real victory" should go to Felton-area residents.

"First, we had success when we won in court the opportunity to prove that eradication was possible without affecting residents. Our second victory was the fact we have effectively eradicated the gypsy moth through the use of non-toxic materials."

Gypsy moths in were officially declared eradicated in Felton this week after state officials confirmed their detection efforts — small traps set up throughout the county — failed to turn up any pests for two consecutive life-cycle seasons — May through October of 1985 and 1986.

Again, both Connell and Bergman said detection efforts will continue next spring when some 600 traps are set out.

"We'll always be on the lookout," said Connell. "There's continual pressure from people moving to the area from gypsy moth-infested areas back East and up north."

Gypsy moths lay egg masses on household goods, lawn furniture, lumber or mobile homes. Officials say the Felton infestation began with eggs brought in on a load of lumber from Oregon for rebuilding the Felton covered bridge.

REFERENCE