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Insects boring through nation's forests

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by Ellyn Ferguson
Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON -- From Connecticut to California, bugs are eating their way through millions of trees on private, state and federal lands.



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In Alaska and parts of the West, bark beetles such as mountain pine beetles account for most of the damage. In the South, it's the red oak borer and the southern pine beetle. In the East, it's the hemlock woolly adelgid.



U.S. Census Information

The U.S. Forest Service predicts that trees on 70 million acres of all forestlands -- state, private and federal -- are at risk for higher-than-normal death rates due to insects and disease. That's 11 million acres higher than the estimate made in 1999, when conditions seemed less favorable for insect pests.



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Overall, almost 10 percent of the nation's forestlands are in the highest-risk category. Robert Mangold of the U.S. Forest Service said many of the hardest-hit areas are clustered in different parts of the country.



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If trees die in the numbers predicted, forests will lose not just greenery but trees whose roots keep soil from eroding and whose branches provide shelter for birds and other animals. Some of the stricken trees -- pine trees and oaks -- provide food for wildlife. And industrial landowners will lose commercially valuable trees.



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To fight back, foresters spray pesticides when practical, thin forests to remove infested trees or use biological agents such as fungi or insects that prey on the bugs attacking trees. The Forest Service's budget for fighting disease and bugs is \$97 million, up from \$60 million in 1999, said



Mangold, director of the agency's forest health division. The \$97 million includes \$82 million in basic funding plus another \$15 million under the agency's national firefighting plan and other sources, Mangold said.



``We're meeting the majority of high-priority needs and a lot of the prevention work we need to do," Mangold said.

Insect populations are cyclical, rising and falling over the years depending on weather and availability of food.

``Different years, different insects come to the forefront," said R. Ladd Livingston, Idaho's state entomologist.

The last few years have been favorable for many insect species. Mild winters have aided their assault on forestlands by allowing more offspring to survive. Several years of drought also left more trees stressed and susceptible to attack.

Mangold backs the Bush administration's Healthy Forests Initiative, which has drawn protests from environmentalists because it would limit challenges to proposed forest thinning projects and require fewer environmental reviews. Legislation based on Bush's proposal is pending in Congress.

Some insects are invaders from overseas. Non-native species such as the gypsy moth, the Asian long-horned beetle and the emerald ash borer have made their mark in America. Since entering the United States in the 1800s, the gypsy moth has defoliated more than 80 million acres of mostly oak forests in the East, with most of the damage occurring in the last 20 years.

The hemlock woolly adelgid entered the United States decades ago in the Pacific Northwest from Asia and worked its way across the country to the East. In 1985, Hurricane Gloria carried the insect across the Long Island Sound to Connecticut, where it now has been reported in hemlocks in all 169 Connecticut towns, said state forester Don Smith.

Smith's goal is to save as many hemlocks as possible. The trees control erosion on the steep embankments where they frequently grow and provide shade along riverbanks to keep water temperatures moderate enough for fish and other aquatic life to survive.

``What we're trying to do at least on state land is to thin the forests before they collapse," Smith said.

Other times, foresters rely on luck to spot and stop imported bugs.

Washington state forester Pat McElroy said a state plant inspector spotted a citrus long-horned beetle, a native of China, emerging from an imported maple tree at a nursery, giving the state an early warning that helped it keep the beetle under control.

The only other strategy: Pray for cold winters that kill insect larvae.

Livingston, Idaho's insect expert, would like to see the federal government pump more money into research that could give him more options in controlling insect outbreaks, especially outbreaks of various bark beetles.

``When research takes place, they find new (tools) we didn't have before. If we'd had that philosophy 100 years ago, we wouldn't have some of the (problems) we have now," Livingston said.

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Fred Stephen, an entomologist at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, also would like to see more federal research on ways to prevent or control insect outbreaks. Although the Healthy Forests legislation under consideration in Congress calls for additional insect research money, Stephen said he is not optimistic.

Research funding rises and falls based on what the federal government considers to be the immediate threat, he said. Consistent funding is necessary to develop effective ways to manage insect populations, Stephen said.

``When these serious problems develop, we often don't have the expertise to deal with it," he said.

Insect infestations come in cycles, and the time to do research is during the down times.

Eventually, Stephen said, ``They'll be back."

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