NEWS FEATURE

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Mass. beetle infestation could impact local forests, public's help sought

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The recent Asian longhorned beetle (*Anoplophora glabripennis*) detection in Worcester marks only the fourth infestation of its kind in the United States. What makes this local infestation stand apart from its predecessors -- to Bay Staters, anyway -- is that it strikes all too close to home.

Unlike the more distant New York, New Jersey and Chicago infestations detected in earlier years, Worcester is not a faraway place. The trees being damaged by ALB here are local trees. The inland port's forested skyline that could change in the months and years ahead is not all that far down the road. The forests that ALB could potentially infest tomorrow are not 500 or 1,000 miles away, but just a short distance from where the beetle was first found in Worcester.

Not only is the Worcester ALB infestation already affecting local trees with very real consequences, it has the potential of spreading to nearby forests in Massachusetts and beyond if left unchecked.

Scientists and forest health managers are attempting to pin down where, when and how the insect first arrived in Worcester, though some of those details might never be known. What is known is that the prospect for eradication of the ALB locally will take years. A timetable for eradication will be better understood upon completion of delimiting surveys to determine the scope of the Massachusetts infestation.

The ALB is estimated to have arrived in the United States sometime in the 1980s, likely coming directly from its home of Asia probably as a stow-away in solid wood packing material.

ALB was first detected infesting trees in 1996 in Brooklyn, N.Y. It has since been found in Manhattan, Queens, Staten Island, and an uninhabited island off Staten Island in New York City, as well as Long Island, N.Y.

In 1998, the insect was detected in Chicago. That infestation was later declared eradicated in April 2008. In 2002, ALB was found in Jersey City, N.J. Another infestation was later detected in New Jersey's Middlesex/Union counties in 2004. Forest health officials subsequently declared the Jersey City infestation eradicated in April 2008. ALB was also found in Toronto, Canada, in 2003.

The anticipated ALB eradication date for New York is 2034 and for Middlesex/Union Counties in New Jersey is 2015. More than 40,000 trees have been removed from the infested areas to date.

It is important to note these eradications came only after considerable cost, not only in dollars, but in years of planning, research, multi-agency coordination, hard work and tough decisions.

An Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Web site said damage from infestations in New York, Illinois, and New Jersey resulted in the removal of thousands of trees and costs to state and federal governments in excess of $168 million since its initial discovery in 1996. ALB has the potential to wreak havoc nationwide, according to the site, affecting lumber, maple syrup, nursery and tourism industries and accumulating more than $41 billion in losses.

ALB damage disrupts the flow of nutrients and water to a tree, eventually killing it. Heavy infestations can kill a tree in one to two years, though seven to 10 years is more common.

The natural spread of ALB is greatly supplemented by human-aided movement, such as through yard waste, firewood and logs. On their own, though, ALB spread very slowly.

There are no known native predators or parasitoids of the ALB.

Worcester ALB program managers plan to remove infested and selected high risk trees. Remaining host trees will be treated with the insecticide imidacloprid by trunk injections or soil injections. This practice has been successful in limiting tree loss from the beetle.

The insect is a native of China and Korea. Unlike many other invasive species, it is considered a serious pest in its native range. In China, the beetle's favored tree is the poplar, which was often planted in rows as a windbreak.

The Worcester detection, reported Aug. 1 by a concerned resident, was a troubling discovery. ALB is one of the most destructive invasive insects in the country today. Unlike the similarly destructive emerald ash borer that only infests and kills ash trees, the ALB infests a wide variety of hardwoods, many of which are found in nearby forests. If left unchecked, ALB poses a serious threat to our urban and rural hardwood forests in North America.

ALB host species include maple, willow, elm, ash, poplar, birch, horsechestnut and others. If the Worcester ALB infestation does spread outside the city area to forested areas, there will be an ample and diverse variety of suitable host trees awaiting them.

"The bad news is that ALB has one of the most diverse ranges of hardwood host trees for an invasive insect," said Massachusetts Dept. of Conservation and Recreation Forest Health Program Leader Charlie Burnham. "The good news is early detection means the impact to forest resources could be reduced."

Citing the potential for widespread forest damage throughout New England, state forest health managers in New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island and Connecticut are making public pleas for support. They are asking for the public's cooperation in keeping an eye out the insect and to report it when they find suspect beetles. So far, no ALB have been spotted in New England states surrounding Massachusetts.

Adult ALB are ¾ -1½ inches long. They are shiny black in color with irregular white spots on their backs. Asian longhorned beetles also have black and white alternating bands of color on their antennae. Their antennae are quite long, about 1½ – 2½ times the lengths of their bodies.

"The more eyes we have looking for one of these invasives, the better chance we have of early detection allowing us the possibility of containing or eradicating the problem," Burnham added.

Massachusetts landowners and residents are urged to keep an eye out for the ALB and report any suspected finds to 1-866-702-9938, a toll-free number.

For more information about the ALB visit:
http://www.na.fs.fed.us/pubs/palerts/alb/alb_pa.pdf or
www.aphis.usda.gov/plant_health/plant_pest_info/asian_lhb/index.shtml

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