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Flying isn't necessary; these insects can hitch a ride

By Sandy Bauers

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Peter Connors walked somberly through a grove of dead ash trees, all victims of the emerald ash borer, all X'ed with green paint for the chain saws.

"This shows what the world economy does to us," said Connors, deputy manager of Madison Heights, a town outside Detroit. "We now know for sure how small we are."

The ash borer and Asian longhorned beetle are but two of an estimated four dozen invasive insects that, scientists suspect, have established themselves in the United States since the mid-1990s. Many of them rode here from China on wooden shipping pallets.

About 95 percent of the world's bagged, boxed or otherwise packaged cargo travels on pallets, which came into use for transporting military supplies in World War II.

There aren't many alternatives to wood; plastic is prohibitively expensive. "Unless somebody is going to come up with levitation, it's the most effective means of moving products," said Bruce Scholnick, president of a pallet-industry association.

The United States bans pallets from abroad that still contain bark. That didn't stop an Asian wood wasp that now poses a threat to pines. It was discovered last fall in upstate New York.

Now, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is adopting international standards requiring wood packaging materials to be heat-treated or fumigated with methyl bromide. The regulations will go into effect Sept. 16.

"It's not a brick wall," said Carl P. Schulze, plant-industry director for the New Jersey Department of Agriculture. "As long as we have a large free flow of international trade, there are always going to be risks. That's a fact of life."

Not all hitchhiking insects become invasive. Many cannot survive here. But for insects from China - the second-largest source of imports to the United States - America is a land of opportunity. Not only are the climates similar, but predators that kept many of them in check back home are not present here.

The emerald ash borer was able to leave behind not only its natural enemies but its history, too.

When U.S. entomologists began searching for information on the bug in order to fight it, they turned to China for help.

What they found was a half-page summary of some research. The rest had been burned a few decades before, in China's Cultural Revolution.

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