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States sue federal government over tree-eating beetles

By **MICHAEL GORMLEY**
Associated Press Writer

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September 15, 2005, 8:58 PM EDT

ALBANY, N.Y. -- Four states sued the Bush administration Thursday over invasive, tree-eating beetles that have entered the U.S. as stowaways on cargo ships.

The Asian long-horned beetle, along with the emerald ash borer and the pine shoot beetle, are the culprits named in the lawsuit by attorneys general from New York, California, Connecticut and Illinois.



The states are seeking a court order to require the Agriculture Department to examine more effective and less environmentally harmful ways to prevent the insects from entering the country, said New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer.

State officials say the insects would cause extensive economic and environmental damage if they move from cities like New York and Chicago to working forests.

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The pests enter the country in wooden pallets and wood-based packaging. The state officials contend that federal officials use a "marginally effective" pesticide, which is being phased out under an international treaty as unsafe to humans.

Also, they said the USDA is following a new rule that requires wooden shipping pallets and other wood packaging material carrying imports to be treated with heat or sprayed with methyl bromide, a chemical the state officials say depletes the ozone and could be a cancer risk.

"It simply doesn't follow that USDA officials are proposing to ramp up its use, and endanger air quality and public health, especially when there are proven non-chemical alternatives," said California Attorney General Bill Lockyer.

One option would be to replace raw wood pallets with pallets made from plywood, processed wood or recycled plastic, a potentially expensive remedy.

The USDA is abiding by international treaties and is reviewing the lawsuit, said department spokeswoman Kristin Scuderi.

Canada has spent millions of dollars to eradicate the Asian long-horned beetle because it has threatened maple trees and forestry operations and Ontario's maple syrup industry.

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