

Discovery of voracious Asian beetle worries agriculture officials

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State and federal agriculture officials on Wednesday warned that destructive Asian beetles have been found near a Sacramento warehouse and dispatched federal firefighters to climb nearby trees to search for traces of the insects.

Officials believe at least three Asian longhorned beetles arrived last month as stowaways in wooden crates along with a shipment of tiles from China. Two of the beetles were found outside a privately operated warehouse at the former McClellan Air Force Base.

The beetle — an inch-long, bullet-shaped insect with white freckles and long antennae — is known for its voracious appetite for hardwood trees such as maple, birch, elm, poplar and sycamore. Oak trees, one of California's best-known hardwoods, are at low risk for infestation, said Steve Lyle, a spokesman for the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

This is the first time the beetles have been found outdoors in the state, said Matt Mathes, a spokesman for the U.S. Forest Service.

"Since they can fly, we were concerned more might have escaped, and we don't want an epidemic starting. That's why we undertook such an aggressive approach," he said.

A search of nearly 200 trees in the area around the warehouse has not turned up any signs of additional insects.

Outbreaks of the beetles have plagued forests and parks in New York, New Jersey and Illinois since the beetle was discovered in the U.S. in 1996. State and federal agencies have spent \$168 million on eradication efforts, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates.

The beetles kill trees because they tunnel into them and lay eggs in their bark. The larvae then consume the trees from the inside before emerging as adults. Insecticide is useless once the eggs hatch.

The state will continue to monitor the region around the warehouse over the next year, said Pat Minyard, director of the state Department of Food and Agriculture. Nearly 200 beetle traps have been set in the area.

Since Monday, a team of four U.S. Forest Service smokejumpers, firefighters trained in parachuting into forest fires, have been searching for traces of the beetles. Smokejumpers are trained to climb trees because their gear is dropped by parachute and often gets tangled in branches.

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