

County gears up for moth invasion

Planning for aerial spraying next spring

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Municipal officials interested in attending the Monmouth County seminar, to be held Sept. 28 in Freehold Township, must respond to the Shade Tree Commission by Sept. 16. The commission's telephone number is (732) 431-7903.

Gearing up for a comeback of the gypsy moth, the Monmouth County Shade Tree Commission is contacting municipal officials regarding aerial spraying to be done in the spring to eradicate the defoliating insect.

"If (municipal officials) want to participate in the gypsy moth program, it's important we know they're on board so we know when and where to spray," said William Porter, commission vice chairman.

The commission is asking municipal officials to attend a Sept. 28 seminar on the aerial spraying. Joseph Zoltowski, chief of the state Bureau of Plant, Pest and Disease Control, is to address the seminar, outlining various government roles in fighting the insect that eats the leaves of trees and shrubs.

The gypsy moth, which defoliates in its caterpillar stage, has posed no significant threat for a few years, according to the county. But now it is coming back.

"We expect a severe outbreak for 2006," said Zig Panek, a certified tree expert for the county Park System and Howell. "If we don't handle that, by 2007, we'll have epidemic numbers."

The commission is to spray by helicopter using the *Bacillus thuringiensis*, or BT, bacterium, according to the county. It's not hazardous to people or pets, the county said.

The commission expects to do the spraying around middle to late May, Porter said.

"That's when they begin to feed," Porter said. "They're in the caterpillar stage. You've got to get them big enough to feed" so they will eat sprayed materials.

The gypsy moth, native to Europe and Asia, began defoliating New Jersey vegetation in 1966, according to the county. Three major population cycles have occurred — in 1972, when 256,000 acres in New Jersey were defoliated; in 1981, when 798,000 acres were defoliated; and in 1990, when 431,000 acres were defoliated.

Millstone Township and Howell are expecting to take part in the county spraying program, according to officials in the two municipalities.

"For the first time in many years, we have a big infestation — along the Jackson border," Millstone Mayor Elias Abilheira said. "We have already identified the areas. The county's going to do an egg

count in the fall to plan for the spring spraying."

Next month, the county is to count gypsy moth egg masses as part of an assessment of the threat.

"From what we're hearing from people that have been out, it looks like it's going to be bad," said county spokesman William K. Heine.

Fifty egg masses per acre translates into "750,000 caterpillars to feed on those trees," Panek said.

"You can actually hear them chew, and (with) the (falling) fecal pellets, you have to have a raincoat or umbrella," Panek said.

Ten egg masses, or 150,000 caterpillars, per acre is tolerable, Panek said. Twenty egg masses, or 300,000 caterpillars, means spraying should be done, he said. Fifty egg masses means there is a severe problem, Panek said.

Spraying costs will be determined after the acreage to be sprayed is determined, Heine said.

"I urge all county residents who find egg masses to contact the Monmouth County Shade Tree Commission," Porter said.

These egg masses will hatch in the spring, according to the county. Then, the caterpillars will climb trees and shrubs to feed.

In Millstone, the township Shade Tree Commission and residents have noticed areas of defoliation totaling "at least a couple hundred acres," Abilheira said. He also asked residents to notify the town of affected areas.

Once specific areas for spraying are identified, residents will be notified, Abilheira said.

In Howell, easily hundreds of acres are affected, Panek said.

"I can't give you the exact numbers now because we're doing egg counts," Panek said.

The environmental impact of gypsy moths includes more than the simple loss of leaves, Panek said. He said there could be more water runoff because less is being absorbed by trees; less shade protection; and less acorn production, meaning deer will turn to home shrubs for feeding.

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