

State fights beetles threatening ash trees

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A hardwood tree commonly found throughout the state — and used to landscape yards or make baseball bats — is coming under siege.

The culprit is a voracious, half-inch predator.

The emerald ash borer, a dark metallic green beetle small enough to fit on a penny but capable of devastating ash trees, has been detected for the first time in the state with this week's confirmation of an infestation in Cattaraugus County.

State environmental and agricultural officials sounded a warning Thursday about the invasive Asian beetle that over the past several years has destroyed tens of millions of ash trees around the country.



Emerald Ash Borer

Now, the little pests, some fear, are taking root to wreak havoc on the state's estimated 900 million ash trees.

The tiny insects potentially could have a profound impact on the landscape, since the green, white, black and blue species of ash account for 7 percent of the state's entire tree population.

"The emerald ash borer has the ability to kill all those trees should they build up to sufficient populations," said Wayne W. Cooper, a regional forester for the state Department of Environmental Conservation. "We're looking at this with great concern because of the potential."

Workers with the DEC and state Department of Agriculture and Markets will spend several weeks in the field trying to get a better handle on the extent of the beetle infestation found in Randolph.

But they're reminding people about a new state regulation that restricts hauling logs and firewood — the primary way the beetles are spreading from place to place — beyond a 50-mile radius. Campers also are being asked not to bring their own firewood into state parks.

"Allegany State Park, in particular, is very close to the site," Cooper said Thursday at a news conference in the DEC's offices downtown.

The emerald ash borer, which has metallic green wing covers and a coppery red or purple abdomen, likely came to the United States in wood packing crates carried on cargo ships and planes from its native Asia.

Signs of dieback

The beetle initially was detected in 2002 near Detroit and has killed an estimated 70 million ash trees as it spread to 13 states.

From mid-May to August, the beetles lay eggs on ash bark.

The eggs hatch into larvae, which feed below the bark and create S-shaped tunnels that disrupt the transport of water and nutrients to the tree. The branches, and eventually the entire tree, die.



Signs of the infestation discovered in Randolph, NY

“You start seeing signs of [canopy] dieback.

Then you see less of a foliage,” Cooper said, adding that leaves turn yellow or brown. “Normally, the tree doesn’t die all in one year. For some of these trees, it could take five to eight years before it dies, depending on how many insects are in there girdling the tree.”

Rick Hoebeke, a Cornell University entomologist, reported the Randolph infestation after two colleagues noticed damage to some ash trees off Interstate 86.

The state inspected the area and found quite a few of the adult beetles, suspected of infecting at least 30 trees. A specimen was sent to the U. S. Department of Agriculture laboratories in Washington, D. C., which confirmed Monday it was, indeed, an emerald ash borer.

“The general population should be aware of it,” Hoebeke said by phone Thursday. “People remember what happened when we lost the American Elm, and even before that the American Chestnut. This has the potential to do the same thing to ash.”

“Based on what we’ve learned from its presence in 10 or 12 Midwestern states, I would say the outlook for ash, if it becomes widespread, is pretty bleak,” Hoebeke said.

The economic impact could be sizable, too. The Eastern U. S. produces nearly 114 million feet of ash board valued at \$25.1 million, according to the DEC.

“Ash has a number of uses,” Hoebeke said. “It’s a popular tree for landscaping. It’s used for furniture. It’s one of the popular woods for baseball bats. To lose a major species of hardwood like that would be devastating for a lot of industries, not to mention the overall impact on the ecosystem.”

Little can be done

About 2,000 purple, triangular traps — coated with a sticky substance attractive to the beetles — have been set up around Western New York to catch the pests and monitor their proliferation.

The discovery of the beetles in this state comes as no surprise: The DEC has been keeping an eye out for them since 2003.

The beetles are difficult to track and contain, but the state said it will work hard to limit their spread, whether that means removing the infested trees or possibly quarantining ash timber.

“This beetle has been detected on either side of Lake Ontario for several years now, and there is little that can be done to stop the natural spread of this devastating pest,” State Agriculture Commissioner Patrick Hooker said.

The emerald ash borer is just the latest invasive species the state has been trying to contain. Others include the Asian long-horned beetle, Sirex woodwasp, didymo, zebra mussels and Eurasian water milfoil, DEC Commissioner Pete Grannis said.

“This is yet another wake-up call for all New Yorkers that invasive species pose a grave threat to the health of our natural resources and ecosystems and, ultimately, our economy.”

For more information, visit www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7253.html. The public can report suspected ash tree damage by calling (866) 640-0652.



These purple, triangular traps have been set up around WNY by the DEC to monitor the levels of infestation.