

# Lanternfly migration could mean trouble for New Jersey

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New Jersey is putting up a fight to keep a new Asian pest from crossing the Delaware River and setting up housekeeping here.

But it may be a losing battle.

“I think it’s coming. It’s so close,” said Joe Zolkowski, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture Division of Plant Industry director, of the spotted lanternfly, which is now in 13 counties of southeastern Pennsylvania. “It’s a good hitchhiker.”

A lot of transportation takes place between New Jersey and the counties that now have the outbreak. That includes 36 bridges between New Jersey and the Pennsylvania counties of Delaware, Philadelphia, Bucks, Northampton and Monroe — all of which have spotted lanternfly.

So New Jersey will conduct surveillance along the border of the two states, at truck stops and other high-use areas of major highways from Warren to Salem counties, Zolkowski said. It also will conduct a public education campaign so people know what to look for and how to report it.

The bug was first found in the United States in Berks County, Pennsylvania, in 2014, and has since spread within Pennsylvania, in spite of the state’s attempts to contain it with quarantines and other measures. Last year, the insect’s population exploded in the 13 counties — and the egg casings they laid on tree bark, house siding and other hard surfaces will start to hatch in April or May.

The leafhopper has no known predators here, and can be devastating to grapevines, fruit trees, nursery plants and other crops, scientists warn.

Penn State Extension materials say the lanternfly “feeds upon over 65 species of plants and as such, is projected to become a serious pest of timber, ornamental trees, tree fruit orchards, grapes, stone fruit, and other small fruits such as blueberries. It can kill hops and feeds on several types of vegetables.”

No one knows for sure how it got to Pennsylvania, but the theory is it came on a ship from Asia.

Especially in the nymph stage after hatching in spring — when it’s black with white spots — it’s easy for spotted lanternflies to jump on people’s hats and clothing, Zolkowski said. It can also hitch a ride in a vehicle.

“People can be accidentally moving them and not know,” he said.

Pennsylvania recently received \$17.5 million from the federal government to contain the outbreak and eradicate it, but how most of that money will be spent has not been determined, said Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Deputy Secretary Fred Strathmeyer.

Penn State will receive \$1.15 million to do public outreach, Strathmeyer said, but the other \$16.35 million is yet to be distributed. One possibility is to focus on efforts in the central part of the outbreak where insect numbers are highest, in Berks, Lehigh and Montgomery counties, he said.

Rutgers University entomologist Cesar Rodriguez-Saona, who works out of the Philip E. Marucci Center for Blueberry and Cranberry Research near Chatsworth in Burlington County, said his center isn't studying the pest. But it is keeping an eye on what happens with it.

“Like any other invasive pest that comes to the U.S. without its native natural enemies, we should be concerned,” Rodriguez-Saona wrote in an email. “It can build high population numbers and pose a threat particularly to the grape industry. We have a growing grape industry here in N.J. So we need to keep an eye on this insect through surveillance and crowdsourced reports. Public education is also important.”

In New Jersey last year, a Warren County resident brought a Christmas tree home from Pennsylvania, and in the warm house, spotted lanternfly eggs hatched.

“New Jersey Department of Agriculture came and disposed of the bugs. All was good,” said Strathmeyer.

Dead spotted lanternflies were found last year in New York and Delaware, and a small infestation of live ones was found in Virginia.

Many wonder how much longer we can hold the critters at bay in New Jersey.

No widespread spraying of insecticide can be done, because there is no safe chemical that can be used on that scale, said Strathmeyer.

There are, however, effective pesticides that can be used in the farm setting, said Cape May County Agricultural Agent Jenny Carleo. She is in the process of warning farmers what to look for and whom to call if they see a spotted lanternfly.

“It is kind of inevitable we should anticipate it will come, because the Delaware River is not very wide,” she said.

“The major thing we have to be concerned about is the wide diversity of crops this insect feeds on,” Carleo said. Its favorite tree to eat is itself an Asian invasive species — ailanthus, also called the tree of heaven.

“We haven't been able to control it either. It's rampant out there on the roadways,” Carleo said of the ailanthus tree.

“I think (spotted lanternfly) could be as bad or worse than gypsy moth. That wasn't as devastating to crops. It was more (of a problem for) forest lands,” said Carleo. “In terms of economic damage, this pest has more potential for devastation economically.”