

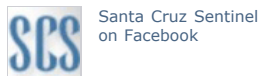
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Bug experts: Calif. moth eradication effort wasted

By TRACIE CONE Associated Press Writer
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FRESNO, Calif.—The light-brown apple moth is either a voracious annihilator of fruits or a benign bug indistinguishable from dozens of its relatives present in California.

It either is responsible for the destruction of millions of dollars worth of produce and nursery plants in the Monterey Bay area, or the losses result from an unrealistic government quarantine blocking harvests and shipping.

The only thing certain about the invasive Australian pest at the center of state eradication efforts is that a battle over government efforts to combat it is ramping up among scientists, politicians and environmentalists.

The issue moved to the state legislative chambers Tuesday where Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, chairman of the agriculture committee and a critic of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, heard testimony on the agency's eradication plan, mostly from opponents.

"It should be viewed less as an invasion in progress and more as an invasion that is completed," said James Carey, professor and former vice chair of the Department of Entomology at UC-Davis. "It's an established species. It can't be eradicated."

Eradication programs never have been successful in abolishing moths, said Carey. Others testified that the state's efforts to combat a species they characterized as a "little nibbler" and a "background pest" would unnecessarily put human and animal health at risk.

Entomologists and environmental advocates said that

farmers in New Zealand control the moths at the field level, and that 99 percent of export shipments pass inspection.

Nursery operators have lost \$10.5 million because of the moth first identified in the state in 2006, said Robert Dolezal, executive vice president of the California Association of Nurseries and Garden Centers. He told Florez that cane berry growers near Watsonville and Salinas had lost between 20 to 50 percent of their crops.

Few plants around Watsonville have been damaged, countered Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commissioner Ken Corbishley, but the presence of the bugs has forced spraying and quarantines. He said he had no figures on the acreage or number of farms affected.

"But no one's coming in here saying there's widespread damage to their crops," Corbishley

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said.

The lively hearing in front of two dozen was in stark contrast to a series of sparsely attended public hearings CDFA has been holding across California on the environmental impact report analyzing options for attacking the moth. CDFA spokesman Mike Jarvis said his agency did not speak at the hearing because its EIR public comment period is open until Sept. 28.

The state EIR says the environmentally superior eradication method is to place sticky traps baited with moth pheromones to confuse females into thinking they have mated. The state says it would spray only in inaccessible areas in the 3,473-square-mile quarantine region.

"That would have worked when there was a small infestation, but it's all over the place," said Derrell Chambers, an entomologist who worked for 45 years in pheromone research for the U.S. Department of

Last updated on 08/25/2009.

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The group Stop The Spray argues that pheromone spraying causes respiratory problems in humans and kills bees, butterflies, birds and other wildlife, in addition to the target bug.

Members sent a letter last week to state legislators asking them to cut funding for the moth eradication program. They also asked state officials to appeal to the USDA to reclassify the moth from a major pest whose presence initiates quarantines to an insect of minor concern.

The reclassification would allow harvests to move forward even when the moth is present, but the one person who spoke at the EIR hearing in Fresno Monday said any change would affect international trade. Barry Bedwell, president of the California Grape and Tree Fruit League, said already a peach grower near Lancaster is having trouble shipping to Mexico because Los Angeles County is in the quarantine area.

"Mexico is very concerned and we have to continue to show them we are working on eradication or they will stop accepting our fruit," Bedwell said. "It's important that people recognize the consequences of their decisions. They are well meaning, but there will be consequences."

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