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Forest Focus

The Bureau of Forestry Newsletter
Summer/Fall 2022

What Can We Do About the Spongy Moth Outbreak?

A Bad Year

There is no doubt that 2022 was an outbreak year for spongy moths (formerly known as “gypsy moths”), whose voracious caterpillars stripped the leaf canopy in many areas of the state. Spongy moths are known to target oaks, and many stands of oak were hit hard. If you noticed some barren mountaintops that resembled more of a winter landscape than summer, unfortunately you are not alone.

Will Defoliation Kill Trees?

When a tree is stripped of its leaves, it is known as *defoliation*. This condition weakens the tree as it uses up valuable reserves to regrow leaves. It is important to note that it’s too early to tell if a recently defoliated tree will die. “It usually takes more than one defoliation event to kill a tree, but trees previously weakened by other factors could die from spongy moth defoliation,” said DCNR Bureau of Forestry Forest Health Division Chief, Don Eggen.

Don’t Wait Until Next Spring!

The best time to plan for spongy moth treatment is not while the damage is actively occurring. Successful treatment begins long in advance with egg mass surveying and planning during the preceding year. When egg mass surveys reveal that the spongy moth population has exceeded a certain threshold, treatment is recommended for the following spring.

[Guide to Spongy Moth Egg Mass Surveying](#)

Go with the Pros

The best way to treat for spongy moths is via aerial application (helicopter or fixed-wing aircraft), targeting a specific stage in caterpillar development, so timing is critical to effectiveness.

If your forest has been impacted heavily by spongy moth, you may wish to have your woodlot treated by professional pilots who use highly specialized equipment.

[List of Aerial Applicators](#)

What Has DCNR Done to Combat the Problem?

This spring, the DCNR Bureau of Forestry sprayed nearly 210,000 acres of state forest, state park, and national forest lands in Pennsylvania. This total represents maximum capacity for the bureau, both logistically and in terms of budget. The 2021 spongy moth spray program was nearly identical in size.

[2022 Spray Block Map](#)

Cooperation is Key

This year, the Pennsylvania Game Commission joined DCNR in the effort to control spongy moths by spraying over 60,000 acres of state game lands. Also, the US Forest Service provided funding and support for spraying in the Allegheny National Forest.

In another positive development, the DCNR Bureau of Forestry Division of Forest Health managers noticed a substantial uptick in private land spraying this year, demonstrating the power of the private sector in the total effort to control spongy moths.

[Guide to Conducting a Private Spongy Moth Suppression Program](#)

Private Forest Landowners Can Help Control Spongy Moths

Pennsylvania is blessed with roughly 17 million acres of forest lands. Of this total, only about 30 percent is publicly owned. As caretakers of 70 percent of Penn's Woods, private landowners can claim an important role in helping to manage the spongy moth population.

The DCNR Bureau of Forestry offers spongy moth management [information](#) for concerned forest landowners and can even visit your property to advise. To arrange for a site visit, please contact your [county service forester](#).

Boom and Bust

Spongy moth populations follow a “boom and bust” cycle, where numbers are high for a period of years, followed by years of relatively low numbers. The current outbreak will surely end at some point, but this can’t be forecast because important factors that affect their populations (for example, seasonal weather) are not known.

The DCNR Bureau of Forestry will remain active and vigilant during this current outbreak, conducting egg mass surveys and aerial defoliation assessment flights, and planning next year’s spongy moth suppression program. We encourage other forest landowners and managers, both public and private, to join us in the fight!

Special thanks to Don Eggen, Division of Forest Health and Ryan Reed, Communications Section-Bureau of Forestry, for their contributions to this article.