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Pesticides might help USDA backtracking on beetles

By John J. Monahan WORCHSTER TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — Contrary to earlier advice from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, residents in the Asian longhorned beetle quarantine area can obtain over-the-counter chemicals to protect potential host trees from becoming infested by the tree-killing bugs.

A letter from Christine K. Markham, the director of USDA's national Asian Longhorned Beetle Eradication program, states that earlier advisories issued by the USDA indicating that no such protective treatment is available were inaccurate.

In the letter in which she retracted that earlier advice, Ms. Markham wrote that homeowners in and outside the quarantine zone had expressed interest in treating trees with chemicals to prevent infestation by the beetles.

"Homeowners interested in pursuing chemical applications independently may do so if they desire," Ms. Markham said.

"It was previously stated that, 'There are no over-the-counter treatments formulated to successfully address the Asian longhorned beetle,' " she wrote in a letter to the Tree Care Industry Association based in Londonderry, N.H. "This statement is inaccurate."

Ms. Markham said chemical treatments for Asian longhorned beetles are available from commercial applicators, as well as pesticides for use by homeowners. She said, however, that homeowners who undertake independent treatment to protect trees that have not become infested will not be reimbursed for the cost of those applications.

State Sen. Harriette L. Chandler, D-Worcester, said she came across the discrepancies in the USDA advisories while assembling a study task force to investigate the environmental impact of the eradication program. The discrepancies raise troubling issues, she said, especially since the agency has cut down 21,000 trees so far, of which only 13,000 were infested.

"They have cut those host trees down and now they are telling us that not only can preventive materials be applied to protect them, but that you or I can do it," Ms. Chandler said.

"We were told just the opposite. The USDA has a lot of explaining to do," she added.

Moreover, Ms. Chandler said, Ms. Markham's letter says the USDA is not paying to have contractors treat trees in the Worcester infestation area this year.

Ms. Chandler described confusion over the issue as "pitiful. I would like to see them (USDA) fund it."

Mark Garvin, spokesman for the Tree Care Industry Association, said the group contacted the USDA to request a clarification of the USDA's previous policy on the issue and received a response in Ms. Markham's June 15 letter.

He said part of the confusion over using chemical treatments arose from initial plans to cut down all the infested trees and those that could become infested in the quarantine zone, which includes Worcester and parts of Shrewsbury, Boylston, West Boylston and Holden.

Under that scenario, Mr. Gavin said, there was no reason to pay for treatment of potential host trees, because the federal government was going to take all those trees down. Since the program was started last summer, however, that policy has changed and not all potential host trees are marked for removal.

Mr. Garvin said several options are available to prevent trees from becoming infested with the beetles.

The method most commonly used by commercial tree care companies is to inject a chemical pesticide into the tree. That involves drilling a hole in the trunk and injecting a pesticide, which is then drawn up into the tree by the same pathways that trees use to draw water and nutrients from the soil.

Another method, soil drenching, he said, can be done with over-the-counter products and involves infusing the soil with a chemical, which is done by spraying a material on the ground around a tree. Once the pesticide penetrates the soil, it is taken up by the root system into the rest of the tree.

It was unclear what impact revisions to the advisory may have on the long-term battle in Worcester to combat the beetle.

Ms. Markham was unavailable yesterday and Thomas Denholm, a USDA colleague who heads the anti-beetle effort in New Jersey, said he also has been operating with the belief there was no treatment for homeowners to protect their trees from beetle infestation.

"I was unaware there was anything available over the counter that a non-licensed applicator could go into the store and buy and use," Mr. Denholm said yesterday.

In the letter, Ms. Markham said the USDA considers chemical treatment "a critical ALB program element" for potential host trees to reduce the beetle population.

Mr. Garvin said with treatments available to protect trees not already infested, property owners may want to consider taking steps to save their trees.

Peter Wild is president and CEO of Arborjet Co. in Woburn, which provides equipment, chemical formulations and systems for applying the insecticide Imidacloprid used for treating trees for the Asian beetle. He said the chemical is commercially available to licensed pesticide applicators and to homeowners.

He said, however, there is concern over potential environmental risks posed by soil drenching and whether it could result in contamination of groundwater. He advised anyone trying to protect trees to use the injection method.

Even though the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency allows homeowners to apply the chemical through soil drenching, some communities remain concerned about the potential for groundwater contamination.

For a number of reasons, he said, "even though these products can be sold over the counter to homeowners, to be done correctly you are better off hiring a professional (who) understands the dosages."

Moreover, in a concentrated infestation area like the one in and around Worcester, where hundreds or thousands of people may be simultaneously applying what is a toxic chemical, concerns about groundwater contamination increase.

When the pesticide is injected, he said, it eliminates any risk of groundwater contamination and smaller amounts of the chemical are used.

Mr. Wild said protection of potential host trees in an infestation area is far more cost effective than cutting all the trees down. He said removal of trees is generally at least 10 times more costly than using chemical treatments to save them.