

'Bunyan Beetle' dines on pines



Southern pine beetle nests in bark

COLLEGE STATION — Draw a line from the Chesapeake Bay on the East Coast, extend it to Houston and you have the scope of an insect blight that is ravaging the Southern pine forests in 13 states.

There are 360 counties in the outbreak area which includes about 58 per cent of the South's 85 million acres of pine forests suffering from the rice-grain sized southern pine beetle.

These insect Paul Bunyans can kill a tree in four to five weeks and there is a 99 per cent mortality in the trees they attack. Even worse is the fact that once a tree is attacked, it is unlikely that it can be saved. The use of insecticides on a forest is economically prohibitive and ecologically questionable.

Dr. Tom Payne, entomologist with the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station and associate professor at Texas A&M University, estimated that "... well over one million board feet of timber have been destroyed by the pest in the past 25 years. In 1973 alone, the beetle killed enough trees to build 48,000 homes."

Texas is one of the hardest-hit states. The infestation includes some 6.4 million acres of the 7.5 million acres of susceptible trees. Payne says this doesn't mean that each tree is infested.

Payne is on temporary leave from the university to serve as the research coordinator of the USDA Southern Pine Beetle Program. In that role he is coordinating research activities involving over 70 scientists working in 12 universities, four U.S. Forest Service laboratories, and two state forestry organizations.

The direction of some of the projects include determination of the beetle's impact of the forests, development of beetle population sampling techniques and study of the beetle's natural enemies such as woodpeckers and other predators, parasites and mites.

In addition, they will screen pesticides to find those that are effective against the beetles and environmentally safe; fertilization to produce healthier trees that can reject infestation; how stand and site factors influence beetles, and the development of behavioral chemicals for survey and suppression.

"Insects produce pheromones (little odors)," Dr. Payne explained. "When a female attacks a tree (we

think she does before the males) her pheromones mix with compounds from the tree to produce a chemical messenger. This will attract several thousand beetles in a period as short as three days. The attacking beetles girdle the tree with their tunneling activity under the bark.

Meanwhile, the search for answers on where the beetles come from and where they will appear next goes on. Payne's crews equipped with three-wheeled motorcycles and trailers search the Texas forests for the beetles. He and his crew collect the odors of the beetle and trees by bringing back infected pine cuttings, where with homemade gear they remove odors and synthesize the compounds trying to reproduce that "insect aphrodisiac" that could bring them another step closer to solving the problem.

Payne feels that learning about the behavior of the beetle is critical to its eventual control.

"In forest entomology, the purpose is to understand, anticipate and manipulate the interactions between insects and trees," he concluded.

Rail strike threat delayed as shopcraft talks continue

Associated Press
WASHINGTON — The threat of a nationwide rail strike eased today as bargainers for four shopcraft unions agreed to keep talking as long as progress was made at the negotiating table.

The unions agreed to let their 6 a.m. strike deadline pass today while federal mediators worked through a second night of near continuous sessions trying to resolve three remaining contract disputes with representatives of the nation's railroads.

A rail strike could leave thousands of daily train commuters and long-distance travelers stranded, as well as choking off most of the nation's rail freight traffic.

"The union gave me the assurance this evening there would not be any strike call as long as there was good faith negotiation going on and every effort to arrive at an agreement," said W. J. Usery Jr., director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service.

James Yost, president of the AFL-CIO Railway Employees Department, with which the four unions are affiliated, said later, "We're a lot farther along than we've ever been."

Union negotiator Orville Jacobson said a settlement is possible, but he added, "We've got some big issues left yet and we're working against the strike deadline."

Negotiators broke for a rest period about 2 a.m. and said that two of five issues in the strike had been settled tentatively. The issues involved job classifications of those coupling and wrecking, two disputed work assignments.

Usery, who had kept the negotiations in almost continuous session since early Tuesday, said both sides were anxious to avoid letting Congress settle the dispute — a possibility in the event of a strike.

The unions, which represent 7,000 railway carmen, boilermakers, firemen and oilers, want to tighten contract language dealing with the subcontracting of work to outside companies and other work rules. The industry contends that such demands infringe on management's rights.

Wages and benefits also must be resolved, but the unions have indicated this could be settled once the other issues were cleared up.

The shopcraft unions have indicated a willingness to accept the pattern settlement signed earlier by all other railway unions. It provides for

a 41 per cent wage-and-benefit boost over three years.

A strike by the four unions, which comprise about 15 per cent of the railroads' total work force, would be honored by other unions and, unless stopped by Congress, would shut down all rail freight and passenger service across the country.

This would mean no service for an estimated 750,000 daily commuters in New York, Chicago and other big cities, and for the 50,000 daily riders

on the intercity trains run by the Amtrak Corp. The railroads also carry 4.2 million tons of freight a day, most of which would be halted.

The only possible exceptions might be for military cargo, perishables and livestock, which have been given special consideration in past strikes.

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Political Forum 845-1515

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