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Hundreds of health complaints followed apple moth spraying

SANTA CRUZ AND MONTEREY COUNTIES AT CENTER OF EFFORT

By Shanna McCord
 Santa Cruz Sentinel
 Article Launched: 01/06/2008 02:24:50 AM PST

SANTA CRUZ - The number of people who suffered burning eyes, scratchy throats and other ailments after the state sprayed Santa Cruz and Monterey counties for the light brown apple moth might be much higher than previously believed, although state agriculture officials insist the pesticide was unlikely the cause of any illness.

About 50 area residents concerned with the aerial pesticide applications last fall turned out for a Friday news conference at Santa Cruz City Hall to listen to the findings documented in two reports compiled by a group of concerned citizens called California Alliance to Stop the Spray. The reports are related to health effects from the pheromone spray known as CheckMate LBAM-F.

The reports, about 200 pages each, state there were 643 complaints of physical harm from the spray in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties - itchy eyes and throats, shortness of breath, asthma attacks, skin rashes, headaches and even interruptions in menstrual cycles.

Many of the complaints cited in the report came from e-mails received by public interest groups, phone calls and doctors' reports, in addition to more than 300 formal complaints to the state.

The state Department of Food and Agriculture received 330 illness reports since the moth eradication program started in September, spokesman Steve Lyle said.

"The spray affected people in different ways," said Pacific Grove resident Mike Lynberg, a writer and communications consultant who

compiled the reports. "But they all had one thing in common. It was like nothing they had ever experienced before and it happened after the spraying."

Anyone who has called the state to complain of health problems tied to the pesticide spray is urged to see a doctor and file a formal report, which is maintained in a database available to public health investigators, Lyle said.

"We keep a comprehensive list of first and last names with addresses and symptoms," he said. "We maintain that information in a database should a public health agency choose to investigate."

State agriculture officials said the pesticide was merely a scent - a synthetic pheromone of a female moth designed to confuse male moths and disrupt their mating patterns enough to destroy the population.

More than 10,000 light brown apple moths have been trapped in Santa Cruz County, which is the largest infestation in the state and has the potential to destroy millions of dollars of crops, agriculture officials said.

The state Department of Pesticide Regulation and the federal Environmental Protection Agency reviewed the pesticide and concluded potential risks to humans could only occur with high levels of exposure. However, the amount sprayed on the Central Coast was "extremely low" and not likely to cause symptoms reported by several hundred residents, according to a Nov. 16 letter signed by Mary-Ann Warmerdam, director of the state Department of Pesticide Regulation.

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"The chemicals have, in fact, been reviewed," Lyle said. "And they found the pheromone doesn't kill anything. It doesn't even kill the moth, it only confuses its mating."

People attending the news conference said they're worried about future pesticide spraying in the area, something state officials have indicated will happen, although they haven't pinned down a definite date.

"The city and county need to come up with a plan for how to prepare for the next round of spraying, God forbid it should happen," said Santa Cruz Councilman Tony Madrigal, who organized the news conference with Councilman Ed Porter. "What is our plan for playground equipment? What is our plan for the landscaping? Those are questions we need to be asking."

Lyle said the state is waiting for a recommendation from an international group of scientists known for expertise with the light brown apple moth before launching another round of spraying.

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