

World's worst palm pest in state

By LEN RICHARDSON

AGRICULTURAL officials have confirmed the detection of a red palm weevil in the Laguna Beach area of Orange County — the first-ever detection of the pest in the U.S. The weevil is considered to be the world's worst pest of palm trees. An infestation typically results in the death of the tree.

"This invasive pest is a threat to our nursery growers and date palm farmers," says A.G. Kawamura, secretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture. "I would like to express my gratitude to the landscape contractor who originally reported this pest. He is a good Samaritan who did the right thing when he took the time to notify local agricultural authorities, and he has given us a very valuable head start in our efforts."

Emergency meeting

Scientists and growers met Oct. 22 at the University of California, Riverside, to address the devastating new threat. The weevil was discovered infesting a Canary Islands palm in a residential area by a landscape specialist.

Thomas O. Baldwin, dean of UC R's College of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, and Albert Keck, chairman of the California Date Commission and a major palm grower in the Coachella Valley, convened the meeting to plan strategies for containing and eradicating the weevil.

Key Points

- The red palm weevil is the world's worst pest for palm trees.
- The Laguna Beach find is the first-ever detection of the red palm weevil in the U.S.
- Palm trees generate \$70 million in annual nursery plant sales in the state.

Keck, president of Hadley Inc., which supplies dates to the food industry and palm trees to the landscape industry, said, "This problem is central to our livelihood." Noting that palm trees are an integral part of the Southern California landscape, he said the weevil's potential impact on the state and beyond would be catastrophic on both economic and emotional fronts.

In response to the original contact by the landscaper, state and local officials, working in partnership with the USDA, began an extensive, door-to-door survey in the neighborhood and are setting about 250 traps to determine if an infestation exists.

Palm trees, many of which are highly valued as landscaping plants, generate about \$70 million in annual nursery plant sales in California. Palm trees are also used for producing crops and marketable agricultural commodities including coconuts, dates and oils. In California, date palm growers harvest an annual crop worth about \$30 million. Most are in the Coachella Valley region.



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International spread

The red palm weevil is native to Southeast Asia and has spread throughout the Arabian Gulf. It is found in parts of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and Oceania. Prior to the Orange County detection, the closest confirmed infestation to the U.S. was in the Dutch Antilles in 2009, the first report of the pest in the Western Hemisphere. It was also confirmed in Aruba in 2009.



MOST WANTED: The weevil found in Laguna Beach has a single red stripe down the length of its snout. The larvae are pale yellow, brown-headed legless grubs; some can be longer than 2 inches.

Entomologist Mark Hoddle, the director of the Center for Invasive Species Research at UCR, says, "The international trade in live palms is the most likely source for this pest. It was probably moved as eggs, larvae or pupae hidden inside palms. These can travel great distances because they live with their food supply."

Once larvae emerge as new adults, they abandon their original host plant and fly to new palms, traveling as many as 4.3 miles in three to five days. Adult red palm weevils are large beetles with body lengths of 1.4 to 1.6 inches. The weevils have a long, slender snout which the female uses to penetrate palm tissue and create access wounds in which eggs are deposited. Adult weevils are predominately reddish-brown. Female red palm weevils bore into a palm tree to form a hole to lay eggs.

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By Bill Ulrich



Bill Ulrich

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