Southern Pine Beetle: Another Year of Low Activity Predicted in Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas for 2009

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For the eleventh year in a row, no infestations of the South's most destructive forest pest, the southern pine beetle (SPB), were detected in East Texas, Louisiana or Arkansas in 2008. The most recent SPB infestations detected in East Texas were reported in 1998, when the last major outbreak ended. Early spring surveys conducted with attractant-baited traps in March and April of 2008 correctly forecasted these low infestation levels. The results of this year’s SPB prediction survey clearly indicate that another low year of SPB activity can be expected in 2009 for Texas and other southern states located west of the Mississippi River.

The Texas Forest Service (TFS) has developed an effective system for predicting SPB infestation trends and levels. The system, implemented by cooperating state and federal forestry agencies across the South since 1986, uses attractant-baited traps placed in pine forests in early spring. The traps sample dispersing populations of two insects: SPB and one of its natural predators, the checkered or clerid beetle. The average numbers of SPB per day, coupled with the ratio of SPB to predators, provide information required to predict whether SPB trends will be increasing, static or declining from the year before.

In March 2009, survey traps were installed and monitored in 12 counties (from Nacogdoches to Liberty) and the four National Forests in Texas. Results were very similar to those reported since 1999. Not a single SPB adult was captured, while more than 4,400 checkered beetles were caught in all traps combined. Clearly, despite damage from Hurricane Ike and another mild winter, there are no indications that SPB populations have begun to rebound from the low levels experienced since 1998. Continued low SPB levels are expected throughout the year. Based on similar trap catches, no SPB problems are anticipated during 2009 in Louisiana, Arkansas or Oklahoma pine forests either.

Historically, SPB outbreaks have occurred every 6-9 years in East Texas. Since SPB is a native and populations tend to be cyclic, another outbreak of this native insect pest eventually is anticipated in Western Gulf states. In a continuing effort to monitor the SPB population cycle and predict pending outbreaks, the trapping survey will be repeated throughout the southern United States in the spring of 2010.

With SPB populations at very low levels, now would be an ideal time for private forest landowners with pine plantations to take preventive measures to avoid beetle-caused losses in the future. To reduce susceptibility to SPB infestation, dense pine stands (those having stand basal areas exceeding 120 square feet per acre) should be thinned. Thinning serves to maintain vigor of the remaining trees and increases spacing between trees, which in turn reduces risks of losses to both SPB and wildfires. Healthy, rapidly-
growing pines are more able to ward off initial beetle attack with copious flows of pitch or oleoresin. Thinning also pays dividends by encouraging trees to grow to a more valuable pole or sawtimber size in a shorter period of time.

Dense stands in need of a first thinning may qualify for federal cost shares, under the Southern Pine Beetle Prevention Project. This is a cooperative project administered by the Texas Forest Service with cost-share funds provided by the USDA Forest Service, Forest Health Protection.

Since the SPB Prevention Project began offering cost shares for first thinning in 2003, a total of 1,112 cases involving over 75,000 acres in East Texas have been approved for cost shared thinning. Of these, 809 cases covering 56,214 acres have been completed and more than $3 million in cost shares have been paid to private landowners. Additional federal funds for this successful program have been provided for FY 2009, so there is still ample opportunity for more landowners to participate. For more information, contact the Texas Forest Service District office nearest you or visit the TFS web page at http://txforestservice.tamu.edu and click on Insects and Diseases, Publications, then Insects.

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