

Don't Move Pests

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Over the course of history, we have seen a lot of problems evolve from insects moving into an area where they were not native. When any species is moved out of its original ecosystem, we often find that in the absence of natural controls, these species will explode and become a problem. The irony in all of this is that most times these expansions in range are not a naturally occurring event, they are human aided. We basically create our own problems!

Insect and plant disease pests scare me the most! During the 1960's and 1970's I saw what Dutch Elm Disease did to the stately American Elms. I've been in Michigan and seen what emerald ash borer has done to the native ashes there. Every year I see what alfalfa weevil does to our alfalfa crop and how much money producers have to spend to be able to have any alfalfa to cut.

Here's the key point in this entire column. Many people don't realize that they are potentially moving a pest from one location to another. A well meaning gardener visits their sister in eastern Texas and bring home some plants out of the sister's yard. They are dug up, dropped in a can or trash bag, brought back to Kansas and planted. The only problem is that in the soil that they brought along with the plant was a brand new fire ant queen. The plant gets planted in the Kansas yard and the queen fire ant gets established in a brand new location without any other fire ants for competition. By the end of the summer, all of a sudden, people are getting stung by fire ants! Could it happen? It already has in two cities in Kansas. In both cases fire ants came in on nursery stock and fire ant colonies were established.

Another scary scenario involves campers. A couple has been camping in Wisconsin for a couple of weeks. It comes time to head back home and they have a couple pieces of firewood remaining. Without even thinking about it the firewood gets tossed in the back of the camper and returns to Kansas. Once the campers are home, they clean the camper out, toss the firewood off to the side of the garage and forget about it. The problem is that the firewood contains several emerald ash borer larvae. The pieces of firewood lay there all fall and winter and the next spring a half dozen emerald ash borers emerge, mate and fly off to lay their eggs in the nearest ash tree. Five to ten years later, all of a sudden the population has gotten big enough that ash trees are dying and it has spread a long ways from the original infestation and ash trees are being cut down everywhere trying to stop the spread.

Here's where we all need to pitch in to help. Left to their own transportation, emerald ash borers will only move five or ten miles a year. But with a little human assistance, all of a sudden they travel 600 miles in two days! Don't move any raw plant products. There isn't enough space here to tell you all the pest quarantine areas that exist all over the country. If you want to buy new plants to put in your yard, buy them from a reputable nursery. If there were quarantines involved with where the plants were grown, the companies know how to sanitize and prevent the spread of insects and diseases. If you are a camper, don't haul firewood anywhere. Burn it where you buy it. If you don't burn it all, leave it for the next camper, don't bring it home. Don't haul lumber long distances unless it's been kiln treated to kill any potential insect pests inside the lumber. Our plants face enough challenges the way it is, they don't need to face new challenges. Use your head, and don't move plants or plant products!