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Exotic Pest Invasion--Plan of Action for Extension Educators

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Abstract

Exotic pests can unknowingly be transported into your community and cause ecological and economic harm. A plan of action for Extension educators confronted by an exotic pest invasion could help minimize the threat. The plan includes: Define the threat, Identify the pest, Enact emergency programming, Ensure technical readiness, Disseminate information, Facilitate community meetings, Communicate with officials, Know the law, Do local research, and Keep a positive attitude. Wood County, Ohio Extension shares how they have followed this action plan against an Emerald Ash Borer invasion. This plan can be adapted by Extension educators to battle other invasive pests.

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Background

Exotic pest invasion has increased due to worldwide trade and travel, climate change, and degradation of habitat. The threat of economic loss by an exotic pest can occur anywhere. These foreign bodies can take form as a disease, insect, plant, or microscopic organism. Pests can hitch a ride on shipping materials, be carried on wind currents, or transmitted from animal to animal. While these organisms may not be considered pests in their native environments, they often become pests when relocated to a part of the world with no natural controls.

What role does a county Extension educator have when his or her community is invaded by an exotic pest? The following plan of action will serve as a guide for other Extension educators, no matter what pest invasion they may be battling.

Plan of Action

Define the Threat

Determine what the threat is. What impact will this pest have on the community, and who will be affected? How would you rate the potential severity of damage that may be inflicted? Is there a possibility of economic loss? What change will this pest cause? Are there any benefits?

Identify the Pest

Do not cause a false alarm. Misdiagnosis may result in incorrect control measures, unnecessary quarantines, and consumer rejection of products. Does your state have Extension specialists qualified to identify the pest? Develop a protocol to insure proper identification. Establish prescreening procedures so that regulatory officials can handle legitimate infestations. Seek professionals to assist in possible sightings. Report possible sightings to the media only after a positive identification by proper authorities has been made.

Enact Emergency Extension Programming

Reprioritize Extension programming. Because of the rapid speed at which preventative action may be needed, the county educator may need to devote a large amount of unplanned time. Seek

assistance from surrounding counties, region, or state Extension personnel. Be able to quickly react to local needs. Hire temporary help if needed. Communicate with county commissioners and seek emergency funds. Inform supervisors and Extension advisory committees, and explain why other programs may be cancelled.

Gather Data

Gather an inventory of available educational resources. Fact sheets, Web sites, scientific guidelines, and peer-reviewed journal articles may be needed to develop a response plan. It is important to access the most current and accurate information from highly credible sources.

Disseminate Information

Become a local expert. Be considered the person to turn to when the public needs to know. Give accurate information, and make sure you are reporting information that is consistent among all agencies involved. Use Extension newsletters, local newspaper articles, local TV, radio, posters, and exhibits to inform the public.

Facilitate Community Meetings

Be a visible resource for the community. A local Extension educator may be the only recognizable face in a community meeting with government regulators or experts. An Extension facilitator may help calm the public knowing a local person is involved.

Communicate with Officials

Keep authorities informed. Set up an email list for, or mail information to township trustees, county commissioners, state and federal legislative representatives, law enforcement, municipal governments, and/or emergency management agencies. Help them understand their role and authority. Collaborate with regulatory authorities to implement control measures.

Understand the Law

Secure a copy of local, state, or federal legal codes that authorize pest control action. Who has authority to control the pest? What is the lead agency? What are the rights of the consumer concerning monetary compensation or trespass authority?

Initiate Local Research

Conduct local research. Is there a lack of information on this invasive pest concerning your local conditions? Can you gather data or conduct scouting to assist in pest control decision making? In the aftermath of pest invasion, a plan of recovery may include the use of new crops, animals, or alternative pesticides.

Plan of Action in Progress in Northwest Ohio

The Emerald Ash Borer, *Agrilus planipennis*, is an exotic pest that likely traveled on ship cargo and arrived in Detroit, Michigan from China. The Emerald Ash Borer was not identified as an invasive pest until 2002. Communication with other Extension educators and federal agencies alerted Wood County Extension staff of the potential threat. It has already killed about 16 million ash trees in southeast Michigan and continues to spread south to Ohio.

Wood County, Ohio (county seat, Bowling Green) is located about 50 miles southeast of the infestation center. The first positive identification of emerald ash borer in Wood County occurred in 2003. Wood County Extension staff quickly changed its programming priority. Specific emerald ash borer Extension activities included: survey of trap trees to locate infestation, consumer call site visits, local fact sheet, local Web site, participation in community information meetings, woodlot management workshops, assistance to newly located federal and state agency personnel, county fair exhibit, and press releases. Future programming will also include quarantine regulation education, timber utilization, and replacement tree recommendations and care. Emerald Ash Borer education will be a significant program need in Wood County for many years to come.

Future Threat of Invasive Pests

No county in America is immune to invasion by destructive non-native pests or species. Communities are threatened by loss of habitat, native species destruction, or ecological changes brought on by invasive pests. Long-term strategies for effective prevention or containment of destructive exotic species are needed. Become aware of potential threats to your community. By following this plan of action, Extension educators can be an important part of the battle against invasive pests.

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