



## Forest Health Task Force Update – June 2010

The Forest Health Task Force was initiated in August 2006 to address forest health issues of regional concern and to advise, guide and support the Southern Group of State Foresters (SGSF) in responding to emerging issues and in implementing programs affecting southern forest resource health. Additional objectives are to engage in strategic collaboration on region-wide or multi-state projects, to provide a forum for discussion about important forest health opportunities and challenges on the regional or national level, to identify and promote training opportunities for forest health staff, and to assist in the development of a regional response plan for forest health emergencies. Dr. Ronald Billings, Texas Forest Service is Chairman of the Task Force while James Johnson, Georgia Forestry Commission, serves as Vice-chairman. Other members include one forest pest specialist from each of the southern states and representatives from the USDA Forest Service, Southern Research Station and Forest Health Protection. Robert Farris, State Forester of Georgia, serves as the SGSF Liaison with the Forest Health Task Force.

The following represents the Task Forces report to the Southern Group of State Foresters as submitted by the group chair Dr. Ron Billings 2 June, 2010. The issues that face

us in the southern region include:

- **Emerald Ash Borer:** Still a major concern to southern states, with infestations established in MO, KY, WV, and VA. Prevention efforts have been focused on increasing public awareness and reducing long-distance movement of firewood. 2010 trapping results later this summer should document any expansion in the EAB range.
- **Southern pine beetle** at historically low levels across the South in 2009, with only 445 SPB spots detected. Predictions for 2010 are for continued low populations, with exception of a few areas in Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia and New Jersey where moderate increases may occur. The SPB Prevention Project is continuing in 13 southern states, with more than 800,000 acres of high hazard stands treated to date with federal cost shares.
- **Cogongrass** control efforts have increased dramatically, particularly in AL, MS and GA, as a result of the interstate MOU and nearly \$10 million in federal funding.
- **Laurel wilt** now present in 4 states, including Jackson County, MS. Avocado growers in south Florida are concerned about potential impacts.
- **Gypsy moth** populations are expected to be low in 2010, due to natural control by the *Entomophaga* fungus.
- **Hemlock woolly adelgid** continues to expand infestations northward, threatening eastern hemlock populations throughout the range of this host.
- **Mexican soapberry borer**, an invasive pest of western soapberry, continues to spread in Texas, with infestations detected in 33 counties.

The Forest Health Task Force (FHTF) met most recently as a group in Gulfport, MS on July 28, 2009 in conjunction with the Southern Forest Insect Work Conference (SFIWC). Topics discussed were 1)

long-distance transport of firewood and firefighting equipment in relation to movement of invasive pests, 2) update on the cogongrass MOU, 3) ArborGen's proposal to field test eucalyptus hybrids in various southern states, 4) need to include forest health considerations in the State Forest Assessments that are being developed, 5) review of the Eastern Forest Environmental Threat Assessment Center, and 6) update on the Southern Pine Beetle Prevention and Restoration Program.

With the detection of the emerald ash borer in Missouri, Virginia, and most recently in Kentucky, the issue of invasive pest movement in firewood continues to be a major concern. The firewood position paper developed by the FHTF in 2008 has been adopted by the Southern Forest Insect Work Conference and is posted on their webpage at <http://www.sfiwc.org/resolutions.html>. At their annual meeting in Albuquerque in September 2009, the National Association of State Foresters approved a firewood resolution and adopted a policy statement entitled "A Comprehensive Strategy to Address the Role of Firewood in the Introduction and Spread of Invasive Species."

The Cogongrass MOU developed by the FHTF has been signed by eight state foresters (AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, and TX). This document testifies to the region-wide cooperation in place to battle this particular invasive species and may have helped in procuring ARRA (stimulus)–

project funds for Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi. Cogongrass control efforts have increased dramatically across the Region as a result of ARRA funding, Redesign funding, and regular non-native invasive plants program funding. Nearly \$10 million across the Region is now dedicated to controlling and managing this aggressive weed.

Several FHTF members participated in a conference call on September 3 with NASF representatives and concerned southern state foresters to discuss the ArborGen proposal to establish cold-hardy eucalyptus plantations in several southern states, and the larger concern of introducing non-native species into our region. Mike Countess, Policy Analyst with the Southern Group of State Foresters (SGSF), together with a few other key individuals, has prepared a white paper on the subject to better inform the Southern Group of State Foresters. FHTF representatives will remain engaged with this issue.

Forest Health Protection and the states are working together on efforts designed to decrease the likelihood of pest movement in firewood. The complexity of a national approach to regulating firewood movement led to the creation of the National Firewood Task Force (NFTF), which included members from the National Plant Board, USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, US Forest

Service, NASF and the US Department of Interior National Park Service. The Task Force was charged with two primary tasks: 1) collecting stakeholder ideas for addressing firewood as a pest pathway and 2) developing recommendations that if adopted by State and Federal officials and others involved would result in lower pest and disease risks posed by people moving firewood. The NFTF issued its final recommendations for firewood in March 2010, focusing on three primary strategic areas of action: outreach, voluntary and regulatory. Chris Asaro (forest pest specialist in VA) represented the FHTF on the NFTF.

Since the Southern Pine Beetle Prevention Program began offering federal cost shares in 2003, approximately 800,000 acres of beetle-prone pine stands have been treated to date, representing an estimated 10% of the high-risk acreage in the Southeast. Annual funding peaked in 2006 with \$16 million, declining to \$8 million in 2009. In FY2010, FHP granted \$6.7 million to state partners for this program to treat 113,000 acres, mostly through State landowner cost-share programs. The SPB risk map is available for all states to target high-priority treatment areas. State forest pest specialists (who serve also as FHTF members) continue to coordinate their respective state's involvement in the SPB Prevention and Restoration Program.

The annual SPB Prediction Survey was deployed in 15

states during the spring of 2010 to forecast the occurrence and trends of SPB outbreaks across the South and Northeast using strategically placed pheromone traps. Results from this multi-state survey, to be available in early June on the Texas Forest Service web page (<http://texasforests.service.tamu.edu>), forecasts another year of low SPB activity across the South, particularly west of the Mississippi River. Highest trap catches, indicating moderate SPB activity, were recorded on the Fort Stewart Army Base and the Conasauga and Chattooga Ranger Districts in Georgia, Oconee County in South Carolina, and Chesterfield County in Virginia. As predicted, SPB activity remained low throughout 2009, with a few infestations reported only in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Virginia, and South Carolina. State and federal forestry agencies are now using the SPB web-portal to enter standardized information on infestations into the national database. The Forest Health Technology Enterprise Team developed the SPB web-portal with assistance from state and federal forest pest management specialists.

The red bay ambrosia beetle (*Xyleborus glabratus*), vector of the pathogen that causes laurel wilt, was first detected near Port Wentworth, GA in 2002. Since then, the insect and the disease pathogen it carries has spread to a vast region of coastal plain forests in Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida. In

addition to red bay, hosts include sassafras, spice bush and certain varieties of avocado. **In 2009, laurel wilt was detected for the first time on red bay in Jackson County, Mississippi.** How it spread to Mississippi is being investigated.

The hemlock woolly adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*) can now be found throughout the natural range of the eastern hemlock except in Alabama. Efforts continue with the rearing and release of several predator species in multiple labs throughout the region. These predator releases have not slowed the spread of the pest, but biological controls of this type often take many years to gain a foothold and begin having an impact on the target species. Trees that suffer attacks for five or more years succumb to the pest, but owners of high-value urban trees are encouraged to protect hemlocks with systemic insecticides. See the webpage at <http://na.fs.fed.us/fhp/hwa/maps/2009.pdf> for current information on the distribution of this invasive pest.

The soapberry borer (*Agrilus prionurus*), a relative of the emerald ash borer, continues to kill western soapberry (*Sapindus saponaria* var. *drummondii*) trees in Texas. First detected in 2003 in Travis County, this native of Mexico has now spread to at least 33 counties in Texas. Soapberry

trees larger than 2 inches in diameter along roadsides and in urban landscapes are being killed. Western soapberry appears to be this insect's sole host in Texas and the tree exhibits little resistance to this introduced pest. The infestation has the potential to spread throughout the range of western soapberry, which extends north to Missouri and west to Arizona. The Texas Forest Service is evaluating the effectiveness of systemic insecticides for prevention and control of this pest in high-value trees.

Gypsy moth populations are very low in 2010 due to the *Entomophaga* fungus. No suppression projects are needed in Region 8 this year; however a small eradication project will take place in Tennessee. Slow-the-Spread continues to treat areas in North Carolina and Virginia to decrease the rate of spread into the South.

The National *Phytophthora ramorum* Early Detection Survey of Forests has detected the pathogen that causes Sudden Oak Death outside 5 nurseries in 4 southeastern states (MS, AL, FL, and GA) during 2009. Two of these detections were new in 2009; the others were first detected in 2007 and 2008.

On May 25-27, the USFS Southern Research Station held a facilitated meeting on Climate Change and Mitigation Management Options (CCAMMO) in Raleigh, NC. FHTF Chairman Ron Billings (TX) and

member Rob Trickel (NC) represented the FHTF at this meeting and provided input from the State perspective on effects of climate change on invasive plants, insects and diseases and mitigation options.

19-23, 2010 in Wilmington, NC. T. Evan Nebeker is the Task Force member representing Mississippi and can be reached at [tevannebeker@bellsouth.net](mailto:tevannebeker@bellsouth.net) for additional information or assistance.

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The next meeting of the FHTF will be in conjunction with the Southern Forest Insect Work Conference, scheduled for July