



USDA to Treat for Light Brown Apple Moth (LBAM) in Moraga

By Sophie Braccini



Adult moth and the larvae



Photos courtesy USDA

Larry Hawkins, Regent of Public Affairs for the CA State Department of Agriculture (CDFA), has sent a warning: “Four male LBAM have been spotted in Moraga. That level of low infestation triggers a response called ‘alternative treatment’ that comprises the use of pheromone impregnated twist-ties attached to trees and shrubs. Treatment will start on April 7th in the four areas where the moths were seen.” The moth has also been found in Orinda and near Lafayette. No spraying is planned currently for Lamorinda.

The LBAM is a small Australian insect whose larvae the CDFA asserts are dangerous for our plants. The moth can damage a wide range of crops, native trees, and suburban landscaping. The list of agricultural crops that could be damaged by this pest includes grapes, citrus, stone fruit (peaches, plums, nectarines, cherries, apricots) and many others.

As a result, The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and the CDFA have decided on a long-term goal of eradicating the LBAM. There are many native moths that can be confused for the LBAM. A qualified entomologist must identify adult moths. Larval stages cannot be reliably identified using morphological characters.

In Moraga, twist-ties will be hung on trees and shrubs at a rate of 250 dispensers per acre. The bait stations contain LBAM-specific pheromones that will disrupt the mating but will have no effect on other species. “The

most likely impact will be the reduction of LBAM within the eradication area,” says Hawkins.

The twist-ties will be removed after three months. In the infested residential areas, CDFA will notify residents by first class mail prior to placement of the twist-ties and then an attempt to contact them personally will be made at the time of placement. The twist-tie looks very much like a conventional twist-tie used to seal a plastic vegetable bag. It is dark red in color and is mounted on a metal hanger by winding so that it can be placed up in a tree or other foliage. The hanger is also marked with flagging tape so that it can be seen when it is time for removal. “The twist-tie contains a very small amount of pheromone and poses no significant chemical risk from touching,” says Hawkins, “we also try to place the hangers out of reach.”

“The solution proposed by USDA in Moraga is a good one,” says Susan JunFish, Director of the local group, Parents for a Safer Environment (www.PfSE.org), “New Zealand studies where the pest has been present for over 100 years and where the climate and natural predators are very close to what we have here in the Bay Area, have shown that spraying is ineffective and that Integrated Pest Management (IPM) methods worked best to control the infestation without causing any significant damage to crops. New Zealand researchers have also stated that aerial spraying of the pheromone cannot compete with the natural

pheromone emitted by the female LBAM. So the underlying assumption that aerial application is an option in light of health risks appears unwise.” She adds that her group is concerned by the decision of aerial spraying that has been planned for other parts of Contra Costa. Many Bay Area cities are up in arms against the aerial spraying: the product can drift from three to twenty miles, and the pesticides are contained in plastic-like capsules that are particle sized and known to cause permanent lung damage.

During a Board of Supervisors meeting on March 11th, Wendel Brunner, Public Health Director of Contra Costa Health Services, recommended that an independent environmental health assessment be made prior to aerial spraying. Supervisor Gayle Uilkema believes that this is the right thing to do. “There are a lot of unanswered questions,” said Uilkema, “we need to conduct an impartial risk assessment study which results will be made public.”

But the CDFA is calling the shots and their mission is eradication. According to Hawkins, “We anticipate that some parts of Contra Costa County outside of the Moraga area may be heavily infested and require treatment by air. That final determination has not been made at this point.” He confirms, “We try to work with counties to meet environmental quality, and safety standards for the land and the residents.”