

USDA APHIS Keeps Minnesota Safe From Invasive Species

As you walk through a forest sun shines through the trees and hits your face, so you look up. The trees are missing all their leaves which would not normally be a problem, except it is June. This is what forests across the Midwest have looked like due to the harmful invasive species, Emerald Ash Borer. This insect and other invasive species play a key role in Minnesota's natural resources and agriculture. Minnesota's USDA State Plant Health Inspector Erin Stiers shares what these invasive species mean for Minnesota and how students can combat them.

USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service works to prevent invasive species from entering the United States and containing their spread if they do enter the country. Stiers works specifically with invasive species that affect plant life in Minnesota.

"Our guiding mission is to protect agriculture and natural resources, as well as to promote safe trade," Stiers said.

Her team of seven works across the state in fields, forests and at borders.

"We do things like trap insects, regulate and set up quarantines for exotic species that have made their way into the U.S. We also assist in importing and exporting agricultural goods," Stiers said.

Stiers and her team also work on cooperative agreements with University of Minnesota and Minnesota Department of Agriculture for special projects regarding invasive pests. These include surveys and research and outreach projects.

"The Minnesota Department of Agriculture has several cooperative agreements with us to do surveys inside of producers fields to look for exotic invasive species. Things that should never be here and have not been found to be here before," Stiers said.

The threat of invasive species in Minnesota today comes from the pressure of insects like Gypsy Moth and Emerald Ash Borer that are commonly transmitted through firewood, and from foreign grains crossing Canadian borders. Gypsy moth poses the most current threat in Minnesota as it begins to expand into the state.

“Gypsy Moth is not an eradication program but it's a slow the spread program which means all the actions we're taking are not to get rid of the pest, but just to keep it from just taking over,” Stiers said.

“This year has been particularly interesting because we deregulated Emerald Ash Borer, so we no longer have federal regulations for Emerald Ash Borer,” Stiers said. “Almost all of the firewood regulations that we have were inside of the Emerald Ash Borer quarantine.”

The deregulation means it will be easier for Emerald Ash Borer to spread and adds an extra challenge to preventing the spread of other invasive species without official quarantines. Overall, these changes mean that travelers will play a bigger role than ever in preventing the spread of invasive species. When it comes to students helping deal with these issues Stiers advises that they remain aware of their surroundings when they are outside to look for invasive pests.

“If you walk out of your apartment next spring and you see a tree does not look like it did last spring maybe there's something in it, or something is attacking it so maybe you should call,” Stiers said.

Students can play a vital role in protecting plant life in Minnesota.

“Almost 100% of the time invasive species that we find are not found by us, but by people that are just part of the population,” Stiers said.

Another tip that Stiers shared is buying firewood once you arrive somewhere, and if you do accidentally bring it along to burn it all before you leave. Since Emerald Ash Borer and Gypsy Moth complete their lifecycle inside wood and can then transfer to other trees this is an important step in protecting Minnesota forests.

“Your actions have unintended consequences,” Stiers said.

Minnesota is home to rich natural resources and an abundance of agricultural production. To keep Minnesota’s forests from becoming leafless, and to protect all it’s natural resources, ask yourself how you can keep Minnesota safe from invasive species each time you travel.