State shifts light brown apple moth fight from eradication to control

By DONNA JONES
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WATSONVILLE -- California has given up trying to eradicate the light brown apple moth and will focus on controlling the pest instead.

The switch in strategies was revealed Tuesday as state agriculture officials announced certification of an environmental study of its plan to fight the Australian native.

In certifying the study, agriculture officials also took controversial aerial spraying off the table and say they are only considering ground-based treatments and the release of sterile moths to disrupt breeding.

"At this point, eradication is not viewed as feasible so the program is shifting focus," said Steve Lyle, spokesman for the state Department of Food and Agriculture.

State agriculture officials had hoped to rid California of the moth by 2015, but Lyle said the increase in population size and spread in the past two years has made that impossible.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture came to the same conclusion, announcing its decision to abandon eradication as a goal last week. In a press release, the department said eradication couldn't be pursued "until new tools, such as sterile insect technology, are fully developed and ready for widespread use."

Critics had long said eradication was neither possible nor necessary, that agriculture officials were overreacting to a pest that's been successfully controlled in New Zealand and Australia.

But state officials worried about the impact of the moth on California's multibillion-dollar agriculture industry.

When the moth first appeared in Santa Cruz County in 2007, they launched an offensive that included aerial spraying over urban areas. Residents protested. Some blamed the spraying for illnesses. In 2008, the county and city of Santa Cruz sued to stop the aerial treatment, and a superior court judge halted the spraying until the just-certified environmental study could be conducted.

"This is a tremendous victory," said Santa Cruz County Supervisor Neal Coonerty. "Because Santa Cruz stood strong, we don't have to face planes dropping chemicals down on top of us."

The federal decision to shift goals was announced along with the release of a draft response to petitions seeking to downgrade the threat status of moth and end quarantine and eradication programs in favor of strategies to control the moth.

In the draft federal agriculture officials decline to downgrade the moth's status and say they'll continue to quarantine areas where the pest is found.

That means Santa Cruz County and all or parts of 16 other California counties will remain under a quarantine that requires inspectors to clear agricultural products before shipment out of the area.

John Eiskamp, president of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, said he wasn't surprised officials decided not to pursue eradication.

"I felt it was beyond eradication, especially the way they were trapped last year," Eiskamp said.

In 2009, 43,347 light brown apple moths were trapped in Santa Cruz County, up from 11,095 in 2007, according to state figures. The number of moths trapped statewide has grown from 16,812 in 2007 to 203,986 last year.

Eiskamp said the moth can be controlled, but the challenge for county growers, especially those who grow organic produce, will be meeting the quarantine standard of zero moths.

"One find and your whole field is lost," he said.

Eiskamp said it's the quarantine, not the moth, that's caused economic losses. He said the moth was found in three area berry ranches last year.

"One or two of those ranches didn't produce anything the rest of the season, and it took time to get the third field cleaned up," Eiskamp said.

But dropping the quarantine wouldn't necessarily help growers, since trading partners in other countries might then stop buying California produce or implement quarantines of their own with varying rules, he said.

"At least the federal quarantine protects us from that happening," Eiskamp said.

The light brown apple moth was first trapped in California in 2006 in a Berkeley backyard. It has since been found in a more than a dozen counties, with the greatest populations in Santa Cruz and San Francisco counties.