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NEWS • RELEASE

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Hemlock Woolly Adelgid Discovered in Western North Carolina

The USDA Forest Service is reporting several new outbreaks of the hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) in western North Carolina. The hemlock adelgid is an exotic pest first discovered in this country in the 1950s. Up until now, it has been found mainly from Virginia northward. This non-native forest pest has no known natural enemies and has already caused extensive damage and mortality to the Eastern hemlock in the mid Atlantic region.

"The Hemlock Woolly Adelgid has been slowly spreading southward at the rate of about ten miles a year," said USDA Forest Health Specialist Rusty Rhea. " It represents a serious threat to the long-term survival of the Eastern Hemlock and the less common Carolina Hemlock in the wilds of western North Carolina and the rest of the Southern Appalachians. The hemlock adelgid was probably accidentally brought into western North Carolina on imported plant nursery stock. Once the adelgid is introduced to this area, the most likely way it can spread locally is by birds and small mammals carrying it from one hemlock to another," said Rhea.

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This newest outbreak, which has state and federal forestry officials very concerned, covers a 20 square mile area in the Lake Santeetlah area just west of Robbinsville in Graham County. Smaller hemlock adelgid infestations have also been discovered near Celo in Yancey County, and Franklin in Macon County.

Rhea is concerned that the hemlock adelgid could potentially wipe out most of the natural hemlock trees in western North Carolina. “Of greatest significance is the potential loss of hemlock as an important tree species in the forest ecosystem. While the hemlock occurs on less than ten percent of the forest, it provides critical shade along a number of mountain streams and provides important habitat for a wide variety of species and riparian areas. One Neotropical migratory bird, the blackburnian warbler, nests primarily in hemlock trees.”

In the Shenandoah National Park in Virginia, the HWA has already caused tremendous ecological damage. According to Rhea, “after ten years of infestation in the 90s over 40% of the Shenandoah National Park’s hemlocks have been killed, and today only 5% of the Park’s hemlock remain in good condition.”

The outbreak at Santeetlah Lake is within five miles of Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, both of which contain outstanding examples of old growth hemlock forests.

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According to Rhea, “These old growth hemlock stands are definitely at risk from the hemlock adelgid. Our concern is that
migrating birds can now move the adelgid into the Great Smoky Mts. National Park and other forest habitat in western North Carolina and cause the loss of this extremely valuable forest ecosystem species.”

A team of both federal and state agencies is being put together to address the problem of the hemlock woolly adelgid in western North Carolina. This task force includes the USDA Forest Service Forest Health Protection, USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and the NC Division of Forest Resources, NC Dept. of Agriculture, and NC Cooperative Extension Service.

Additional surveys will be done to determine where else the hemlock woolly adelgid may now occur in WNC. Also, nurserymen are being urged to closely examine their ornamental plant stocks for signs of the adelgid. Individual hemlock trees can be treated in a person’s yard or in a nursery with insecticidal soap or horticultural oils. However, there are currently no practical treatments available for the general forest ecosystem.

The USDA Forest Service, in conjunction with NC State University is working on plans to introduce an imported beetle, which is known to feed on the hemlock adelgid. This

beetle has been introduced elsewhere in North Carolina and other states where the hemlock adelgid occurs, but researchers say it will take years to find out if this natural biological control will prove effective in controlling the hemlock woolly adelgid.

Anyone suspecting that they have spotted the hemlock woolly adelgid (cottony masses at the base of the hemlock needles) should contact their local county agriculture extension agent or county forest ranger.

More information about the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid can be found at the USDA Forest service website: http://www.fs.fed.us/na/morgantown/fhp/hwa/hwasite.html.

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