

Questions and Answers: Heat-Treatment Requirement for Canadian Firewood

Invasive forest pests cause millions of dollars in damage annually to American forest industries, residential property, and public lands. These pests, including the emerald ash borer (EAB) and Asian longhorned beetle (ALB), are fatal to the trees they infest and have severe environmental impacts on forest ecosystems. Research has identified untreated firewood and wood packing materials as two of the primary pathways for the introduction of these pests to the United States from abroad.

To reduce the risk of introducing additional invasive species into the United States, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has established treatment requirements for both firewood and wood packing materials entering the country.

A Federal Order requires that Canadian firewood entering the United States be heat treated to a minimum of 71 degrees Celsius for at least 75 minutes. This treatment time has been shown effective against all known pests in firewood. Alternate controls, such as debarking and chemical treatments, have not been shown to be effective at killing both ALB and EAB (debarking with half removal has been shown effective for EAB, but not ALB). Even when a tree is debarked, wood boring insects can hide deep inside the tree beyond the effective range of chemical treatments.

Recently, APHIS participated in a community forum in northern Maine that focused on the heat-treatment requirement. At the forum, a number of concerns were raised regarding the process and the impact it has on firewood cost and availability. APHIS recognizes the importance of readily available firewood. APHIS is working with Canada to look at ways to balance this need with the appropriate management steps to prevent the introduction of invasive pests through the movement of infested firewood.

Below is some additional information on the heat-treatment requirement based on questions raised at the forum.

Q. Why does Canadian firewood need to be heat treated before entering the United States but Canadian logs do not?

A. Canadian logs are allowed into the United States for use at specified locations without heat treatment because each load is shipped to a single location where it is used in a process, such as paper or wood-chip manufacturing, that kills any pests residing in the log.

In comparison, firewood entering the United States goes to many locations and can sit for months or years before being burned. This wide distribution range and long time period would provide ample opportunity for pests to migrate from untreated imported firewood to local forests.

Canadian and U.S. officials plan to further discuss log trade in upcoming talks; current requirements could be changed.

Q. Why can firewood enter Maine from other States hundreds of miles away without heat treatment, but it can't be moved a few miles from Canada? One example is wood chips from the ALB site in Massachusetts that are coming to Maine for biomass fuel.

A. The purpose of the heat-treatment requirement for Canadian firewood is twofold. It keeps out known pests like EAB and ALB, and it prevents new pests from establishing themselves in the United States. There are thousands of additional pests in the global environment, and we need to take steps to prevent new ones from entering the country.

With regard to interstate movement, some States have imposed State-specific regulations that prevent the movement of untreated firewood interstate. APHIS is looking at how such a requirement could work at the national level.

Specific to the issue of moving biomass fuel interstate, the chipping process reduces the size of the biomass pieces to less than 1 inch in two dimensions. This process is fatal to ALB larvae. As a result, we can be confident that these wood chips are not carrying live ALB when they enter Maine.

Q. Is there a process that could be developed to allow untreated wood into just northern Maine?

A. APHIS is able to grant compliance agreements in certain situations that could allow untreated wood to move into Maine from Canada without prior heat treatment. However, the compliance agreement would require that the wood be heat treated at a specified location in Maine prior to distribution. APHIS will work with interested communities to develop a compliance agreement if the community has, or can obtain, an appropriate kiln to perform the necessary heat treatment.

Q. I heard that APHIS was going to meet with Canada to discuss the development of new regulations on the cross-border movement of firewood. What happened at these meetings?

A. Officials with APHIS and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) have agreed to meet in early June 2009 to look at how APHIS' regulation of firewood imports could be harmonized with Canada's parallel directive.

APHIS will work with CFIA to ensure that the regulation of firewood is made as flexible as possible in border areas without increasing the risk for pest movement. The discussions are also expected to focus on the development of a mutually agreed upon definition for firewood.

Q. What else is APHIS doing to help make firewood available in the area?

A. APHIS is working with State and Federal partners to look at alternative means of ensuring the availability of affordable, pest-free firewood in northern Maine. Some of these options include: identifying entities that could purchase and operate kilns, locating alternate firewood vendors, and looking for opportunities or resources that local communities could leverage to help citizens obtain firewood cost-effectively. As the feasibility of these options is determined, more information will be available through the sources listed below.

Q. How can I stay up to date on what APHIS and Canada are doing to address invasive pests in firewood?

A. For more information on importing hardwood firewood from Canada into the United States, please visit the APHIS "Hot Issues" Web page: http://www.aphis.usda.gov/newsroom/hot_issues/index.shtml.

Q. Who can I contact with additional questions?

A. For additional information on firewood regulations, please contact the APHIS State Plant Health Director in your State. Contact information for each State can be found at:

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/services/report_pest_disease/report_pest_disease.shtml.

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