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Severe infestation of caterpillars feeds on Alberta's aspen forests

Edmonton... A massive infestation of forest tent caterpillars is severely affecting aspen forests in northeastern Alberta.

The outbreak is particularly heavy in Fort McMurray and surrounding areas, but also affects the northwest, the Alberta government reports. As well as leaving trees bare after feeding on all their leaves, the caterpillars have clustered by the thousands outside some houses in Fort McMurray and have even caused slippery conditions on roads.

The infestation is part of an unusual outbreak in the province this spring that involves three species of caterpillar - the forest tent caterpillar, the Bruce spanworm and the Linden looper. Normally, the three species are not active at the same time. This spring, two or three species are active in some areas.

The caterpillars all prefer to feed on the leaves of aspens and other deciduous trees and do not normally attack spruce. Their feeding frenzy usually ends between mid-June and the end of June when the caterpillars transform into pupae. They emerge as moths in late June through July.

Trees affected by caterpillars usually grow new leaves in a few weeks, but the growth may be thinner than normal. If the same trees are affected by drought and are severely infested for three to four years, they may not survive.

Staff at Alberta Sustainable Resource Development caution cottagers and others in affected areas to obtain professional advice before using pesticides. Individual responses may not have much impact and may also harm 'predatory beetles' (*Calosoma sp.*). Large numbers of these beetles, known as 'caterpillar hunters', have been observed in areas of caterpillar outbreaks.

The forest tent caterpillar can be identified by long blue lines on its back, hairy 'tufts' and white markings resembling keyholes. It is believed to be in the third or fourth year of a seven-to-10-year cycle in Alberta.

The Bruce spanworm and the Linden looper have been reported in Edmonton and surrounding communities and in the Drayton Valley area. The Bruce spanworm is usually green and curls into a 'loop' shape. The Linden looper, which is not normally found in forested areas, is usually yellow with wavy black lines on top and a rusty brown head.

Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, which is responsible for protecting the health of Alberta forests, is conducting aerial surveys to identify the infested areas. Mapping is to be completed by the end of July.

In 2006, caterpillars chewed the leaves off aspen scattered throughout more than 5.9 million hectares of forested land in the province.

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