

Grasshopper outlook strikes fear on Western range

March 28 2010, By MATT JOYCE , Associated Press Writer



In this July 16, 2009 photo, an adult male migratory grasshopper is seen near near Wheatland, Wyo, in this photo provided by the university of Wyoming. Grasshopper infestations have taken on mythic tones here on the arid prairie of northeastern Wyoming they blanket highways, eat T-shirts off clotheslines and devour nearly every scrap of vegetation on ranches and farms. The myth may come closer to reality this summer than at any time in decades in several states in the West and the Plains. (AP Photo/University of Wyoming, Scott Schell) NO SALES

(AP) -- Grasshopper infestations have taken on mythic tones here on the arid prairie of northeastern Wyoming - they blanket highways, eat T-shirts off clotheslines and devour nearly every scrap of vegetation on ranches and farms.

The myth may come closer to reality this summer than at any time in

decades in several states in the West and the Plains.

A federal survey of adult grasshoppers last fall indicated that parts of Wyoming, Montana, South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska and Idaho could face costly grasshopper infestations this summer.

Ranchers and farmers as well as federal and municipal pest control agencies are praying for well-timed cool and wet weather to stifle the young grasshoppers when they hatch around May and June.

In the meantime, they're scrambling to line up the millions of dollars it will cost to battle an outbreak with aerial insecticide.

"They're grass eaters," said Tom Wright, a rancher near Newcastle in northeast Wyoming about 20 miles from the South Dakota border.

"They'll eat the leaves and leave the stem. And they will eat the stems finally.

"When they're really thick, people say they'll eat T-shirts on a line," he said as he recalled a time in the mid-1980s when the grasshoppers were so thick that you couldn't put your hand on the shady side of a fence post without squashing one.

Grasshoppers are found across the United States, but outbreaks of [pest species](#) are most common in the Plains and Western states. Different species range from a length of under an inch to more than 3 inches.

They provide some ecological benefits, serving as a food source for other animals. However, some pest species are capable of eating their body weight daily in vegetation and can waste up to six times more by dropping forage to the ground.

Making matters worse is the prevalence of migratory species in the latest

surveys - insects that can fly 60 miles in a day.

The Wyoming acreage infested with 15 or more grasshoppers per square yard increased more than 10-fold from 2008 to 2.9 million acres last summer, according to federal surveys.

Regionwide, surveys predict at least 48 million acres of outbreak-level infestation this summer.

"In some states, we may see some of the most severe grasshopper outbreaks that we've seen in nearly 30 years," said Charles Brown, the national grasshopper suppression program manager at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

No government agency keeps a comprehensive tally of the economic damage from grasshoppers, but the cost of spray programs can exceed a million dollars for a single county.

Last summer, when an outbreak first surfaced in Wyoming, the voracious insects hurt hay production and prompted some ranchers to downsize their herds.

Wright didn't sell any cattle because of grasshoppers, but his calves weighed 30 pounds lighter than normal last fall as a result of the insects eating up forage. The grass damage also forced the ranch to buy extra feed to help its cows through the winter, costing about \$10,000, he said.

Paying to participate in a spray program could make sense if it was cheaper than the alternatives, he said.

"At the point that (grasshoppers) eat all the grass, you have to either sell all your cows, lease grass somewhere else or buy hay," he said.

Grasshopper eggs tend to survive better in untilled soil, but that doesn't stop the grown insects from hopping to cropland and eating crops such as corn, alfalfa, sunflowers, soybeans and sugar beets.

"In the past couple of years, we've had some crop damage by grasshoppers, especially alfalfa and soy beans," said Dave Boxler, a research technologist in entomology for the University of Nebraska based in North Platte.

In Wyoming, Gov. Dave Freudenthal announced this month a \$2.7 million plan to help local pest districts and to pay for spraying on state lands this summer. Freudenthal and the state's congressional delegation have also urged the federal government to make more money available for treating federal rangeland.

Pest managers combat rangeland grasshoppers by using planes to spray alternating strips of land with an insecticide that kills the bugs in the nymphal stage, meaning it must be applied within a few weeks after eggs hatch.

Entomologist Scott Schell of the University of Wyoming said the insecticide, Dimilin 2L, has a very low toxicity level for mammals, reptiles and birds. It also has little effect on bees, he said.

Gail Mahnke, supervisor of the Niobrara County Weed and Pest Control District, said she expects grasshopper treatment in the eastern Wyoming county to run about \$1.2 million this summer. That works out to a cost to landowners of about \$1.65 a protected acre. The district plans to spend its \$60,000 in emergency reserves on the project, she said.

Mahnke said she's not sure what will happen if weather conditions unexpectedly kill off the grasshoppers.

"When you're talking a \$1.2 million deal just in this county, and getting it all set up and having all that money sitting here, and then those conditions just happen to hit perfect, what do you do?" she said.

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