

Warm winter may bring pest-filled spring

March 6 2012, By STEPHEN SINGER , Associated Press

(AP) -- The mild winter that has given many Northern farmers a break from shoveling and a welcome chance to catch up on maintenance could lead to a tough spring as many pests that would normally freeze have not.

Winters are usually what one agriculture specialist calls a "reset button" that gives farmer a fresh start come planting season. But with relatively mild temperatures and little snow, insects are surviving, growing and, in some areas, already munching on budding plants.

Almost every state had a warmer-than-usual January, according to the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#). In Albany, N.Y., for example, the average high in January was 37 degrees, when it's usually less than freezing, according to the [National Weather Service](#). In Tulsa, Okla., the average high last month was about 57 degrees, 9 degrees higher than normal.

The Upper Midwest, Great Plains and a few other areas were "much above normal" in temperature, [NOAA](#) said.

Dawn Allen, who has an 89-year-old, family-run bog in Freetown, Mass., said her family will likely start sweeping bogs with a contraption similar to a butterfly net in April to catch winter moth caterpillars, instead of waiting until mid-May, when they typically start. The winter moth caterpillars are aggressive and eat buds, potentially ruining a crop for a whole year.

"It's a big stress factor that gets us out on the bog early," said Allen,

whose farm sells cranberries for juice and pulp converted into cranberry vitamins.

Martha Sylvia, a research technician at the University of Massachusetts cranberry station, said growers should expect to start spraying earlier and more often because there's "definitely an upswing" in winter moths, she said.

"We just know we're in for it," Sylvia said.

Tim Tucker, a beekeeper in Niotaze, Kan., said he saw flies in February when "all flies should be gone" and [bumble bees](#) that usually don't appear until May or June. The [warm weather](#) hasn't been entirely good for beekeeping, though. Usually, queen bees won't lay eggs in the cold, but this year, his hives have been active.

"This year, we have some hives that raised bees all winter," Tucker said. "I don't think they ever stopped."

Because so many bees are being raised, Tucker has had to buy supplemental food, such as sucrose, so they don't eat all the honey he wants to sell.

While bees are good for pollination, many of the insects that are surviving have a destructive bent, such as the bean leaf beetle that targets soybeans, corn flea beetle that damages corn, and the alfalfa weevil. Those insects live close to the surface of the ground so the mild temperatures give them a head start, said Christian Krupke, a Purdue University entomologist.

"Winter is like a big reset button for the Midwest," Krupke said. "It wipes out lots of insects usually."

However, the warmer temperatures generally don't affect insects that spend their winters burrowed deep into the ground, he said. And some insects may be threatened by a lack of snow.

Erin Hodgson, an entomologist at Iowa State University, said a drought there due to a lack of snow could threaten boxelder bugs and beetles, who will die if food fails to emerge. And insects that pass the winter in dormancy above ground could die of dehydration or starvation without the insulating cover of snow, she said.

"Making predictions about overall [insects](#) surviving or not can be kind of tricky," Hodgson said.

But the warmer weather hasn't been all bad, said Henry Talmage, executive director of the Connecticut Farm Bureau. He compared this winter with last year, when southern New England endured back-to-back snow storms and an ice storm. In early February 2011, farmers in Connecticut lost nearly 150 barns and other structures as feet of snow accumulated. Those in Massachusetts and upstate New York also struggled with roof collapses.

This year, farmers were able to spend the [winter](#) working outside, maintaining equipment and buildings, Talmage said.

"Instead of shoveling snow, farmers can do something more productive," Talmage said. "Nobody is complaining. We're all happy at this point it's been as mild as it has been."

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