

Kern/Tulare

GWSS Update



A project of the Glassy-winged Sharpshooter Task Force of Kern and Tulare Counties. Participants: Agricultural Commissioner's Offices of Kern and Tulare Counties, California Department of Food and Agriculture, University of California Cooperative Extension, U.S. Department of Agriculture (APHIS and ARS Divisions).

California's plant nursery industry remains heavily involved in GWSS fight

The glassy-winged sharpshooter (GWSS) has caused headaches and change for more than California's wine grape industry.

The plant nursery business — the state's third largest agricultural sector — plays a large role in containing the spread of GWSS and the deadly Pierce's Disease (PD) which the pest vectors.

As a recognized channel for GWSS movement, the state's \$3.3 billion nursery industry is required to take preventative measures to ensure it doesn't ship the pest from infested areas. Since 2000, nursery plant owners and operators, county agricultural commissioners and their staffs, and state administrators have worked to make sure that no sharpshooters are found on nursery plants so that shipments can move GWSS-free and find acceptance at their destinations. Some 350 plant nurseries have GWSS compliance agreements with the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA).

"It is a labor intensive, time consuming and costly program," says Alan Laird, deputy agricultural commissioner for Ventura County, home to 35 plant nurseries and one of the state's leading plant nursery producers.

But the concerted and Herculean effort is needed, industry sources say. While a main goal of the PD/GWSS program is to protect California's wine grape industry, the No. 2 crop commodity in the state, there are other reasons to include additional commodities in the battle against the pest.

"If we didn't have the nursery protocol, none of the non-infested counties would accept shipments of nursery stock coming from GWSS-infested counties," says Greg Morris, a program supervisor who oversees the nursery efforts for CDFA's \$20 million GWSS/PD program of regulations, research, biocontrol, emergency response and outreach.

"Nurseries don't want to see GWSS

either," says Chris Ono, general manager of Mitsuwa Nursery in Moorpark. "And we want to help protect our agricultural partners."

"Yes, the program is very difficult for the nursery industry," says Robert Crudup, president of Calabasas-based Valley Crest Tree Co. and a member of the state's PD Advisory Task Force. "But we in agriculture have a responsibility that comes with being farmers. We'd want the same protection if the nursery industry faced a similar threat."

An important industry. Nursery plants are California's most frequently moved agricultural products, according to Morris. They're often prime GWSS habitat as well. California has almost 9,000 licensed nurseries, 60 percent of them located in GWSS-infested areas. CDFA's nursery program only tracks those shipments with known GWSS host material headed to non-infested counties, but even so, Morris says, that amounts to some 68,000 truckloads a year.

Backed by state, federal and industry funding, the nursery program is making headway in reducing the numbers of shipments rejected for GWSS. "Statewide, we've shown a decrease every year," Morris says. "In 2001, there were 151 shipment rejections. In 2003, there were 39."

That represents a 74 percent reduction in infested shipments in a two-year period. It also means that more than 99 percent of the state's nursery shipments move GWSS-free.

Ag commissioners take part. Agricultural commissioner offices in the state's GWSS-infested counties have been charged with managing the program. They not only monitor for the pest's presence in nursery yards using visual surveys and trapping but inspect the millions of flats and containers shipped yearly across the state. Four of the top five nursery counties are located in Southern California, including San Diego, Orange, Ventura and Riverside. The four

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counties have also been designated as GWSS-infested counties along with Los Angeles and San Bernardino. Kern and Tulare Counties are considered partially infested. Each county has its own GWSS work plan and budget.

"GWSS created a whole new program for us," says John Ellis, deputy agricultural commissioner for Orange County. "We've added 10 people to our staff to help us monitor and inspect about 1 million flats and containers each year. It's a tremendous amount of work."

Ellis points out that the GWSS inspection and certification program has required extensive training and retraining for his office. "It takes a very special way to focus on looking only for GWSS egg masses and ignoring everything else," he says. "It wasn't easy to start with but we're very good at it now."

Nurseries pay a price. Plant nurseries fund their own GWSS pre-inspections and chemical treatments to prepare for visits by county staff. California obtained \$5 million in emergency federal funds last year to partially reimburse nursery plant owners for GWSS regulation compliance. The 69 nurseries who participate represent the bulk of the state's production. A request for another \$5 million for the coming year is awaiting approval.

Still, for many nurseries, GWSS has definitely hurt business. "It's cost us \$3 million in annual revenues," says Crudup, whose nursery specializes in landscape trees such as crape myrtles and California peppers. "We used to ship material to Northern California. But we could not get our product clean enough of GWSS and had a number of rejections early on. It's terribly expensive to gather plant material, prepare it for shipment and then get rejected. We could not afford it anymore so we made the decision not to ship to Northern California."

At Mitsuwa Nursery, which produces groundcovers and bedding plants, Ono says GWSS inspections and treatments cost the operation up to \$15,000 a year. As one way to adapt and speed the process,

Mitsuwa has changed its ordering process. Customers now must order 24 hours in advance to give the nursery time to inspect plants and notify destination county ag commissioners before shipment. Ono says the nursery's pre-shipment efforts keep GWSS out of his operation, helping save money.

The revenue loss at Valley Crest Tree Co., which covers 800 acres, including 400 GWSS-infested acres in Ventura County, also has forced the nursery to readjust its business strategy. While he accepts the GWSS regulations, Crudup regrets there is still "no exit strategy" in place to solve the sharpshooter problem for plant nurseries. The biggest obstacle is the lack of effective treatment for GWSS egg masses, which the sharpshooter deposits on the hard-to-reach undersides of leaves.

Looking ahead. Like Crudup, the industry is looking for new ways to curtail the presence of GWSS. "We fund a lot of research," says CDFA's Morris. "We're looking at cultural practices and much more, trying to buy time to stop the movement of GWSS."

Most promising, say both Morris and Crudup, is a systemic chemical being studied by University of California researchers. The systemic would kill GWSS nymphs as they emerge from egg masses on plant leaves. Research results are due this summer.

For now, the industry remains committed to carrying out its GWSS orders. And it's proud of its performance so far.

"We're peddling as fast as we can, and everybody's had a pretty good track record," says Orange County's Ellis. "If the industry wasn't working together, we couldn't accomplish it."

Ono agrees. "We've all come together — grape, citrus and nursery," he says. "We've maintained an open dialogue with the ag commissioners and CDFA. That's how the program can run efficiently and why we've been successful."

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— Catherine Merlo