

Asian Gypsy Moth threat

Cabinet approves funding for pheromone traps

Cabinet has approved the allocation of \$500,000 for the purchase, placement and monitoring of pheromone traps to detect whether the Asian Gypsy Moth has entered New Zealand.

Forestry Minister John Falloon said the money would be used by the Ministry of Forestry to place 1978 traps in the vicinity of 11 ports around the country.

Traps will be placed around the ports of: Auckland; Tauranga; New Plymouth; Napier; Wellington; Nelson; Lyttelton; Timaru; Port Chalmers; Dunedin; and Bluff.

The selection of ports is based on visits over the last four years by vessels which

could have hosted Asian Gypsy Moth.

The traps will be placed in a seven kilometre radius around each port, based on recommendations made by the United States Asian Gypsy Moth Science Advisory Panel.

Each trap will be checked every week over the six months during the 1993/4 summer.

Mr Falloon said these intensive measures were necessary to establish that the Asian Gypsy Moth has not come into New Zealand.

"Cabinet is concerned about the issue and saw the necessity to move swiftly

because of the potential threat the Asian Gypsy Moth poses to our country's forests.

"Cabinet also recognised the need to talk with the Australian Government about the issue. I have already forwarded a letter to the Minister responsible for the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service, Simon Crean, expressing my concerns on the matter.

"Both the Government and the Ministry of Forestry understand the need for quick action on this issue, and are making every effort to protect our environment and economy from the Asian Gypsy Moth," Mr Falloon said.



Cabbage tree decline

Sir,

As forest health specialists we were delighted with the excellent collection of articles in your last issue. However, having been principal contributors to the cabbage tree research effort we would like to comment on Philip Simpson's discussion of cabbage tree decline. While Dr Simpson presented a lucid and comprehensive review of the special research project, we would take issue with him on two points: the contention that sudden decline is affecting all *Cordyle* species, and that the primary cause is pathological.

With regard to the first point the FRI national survey, covering over 700 sites from Cape Reinga to Bluff, showed no evidence of decline in either *Cordyle banksii* (forest cabbage tree) or *C. indivisa* (mountain cabbage tree). The second point at issue is Dr Simpson's support for an MLO as the underlying cause of cabbage tree decline, a contention which deeply divided the two field-oriented ecological research groups from the then DSIR pathologists. Despite the numerous media pronouncements, encouraged by the research group involved and their political masters, no MLO has been observed in affected tissue, no remission of symptoms by antibiotics has been demonstrated, successful transmission of the disease has not been achieved, no vector has been demonstrated, and no epidemiological study of disease spread has been carried out. There is no evidence to support the contention that a virulent pathogen (the research group's term) is the underlying cause of cabbage tree

decline. It is worth remembering that although dead horses invariably contain maggots it would be a mistake to conclude blowflies are the primary mortality factor.

The unfortunate controversy which has arisen in the case of cabbage tree decline is, in our opinion, largely the result of the present research funding environment in which research groups search desperately for funds to maintain their year-to-year existence, at the cost of well-planned, collaborative longer-term research.

In the case of the cabbage tree project the most expensive component, the search for a pathogen, was funded in parallel with an investigation of the nature and extent of the problem, primarily due to the availability of funds for only one year. This approach contrasts sharply with a recent investigation into pohutukawa decline, where a wide-ranging problem assessment was followed by a more focused programme once the nature and extent of decline has been clarified. Interestingly, the resource managers' (DOC) prime suspect, insects, was completely exonerated at stage one, and the real underlying cause, possums, identified.

As researchers, it is depressing to find the science reforms, which were to greatly enhance our ability to deliver high-quality and relevant research, also proving divisive, isolating and extremely costly. The cabbage tree research project exemplifies these negative aspects of the current research environment. The monsoon bucket approach to funding is unlikely to provide value for money when applied to forest health problems such as cabbage tree decline where effective action depends on first defining the problem.

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Phil Simpson replies

Sir,

Sudden Decline symptoms in other *Cordylines*

I have observed classic Sudden Decline in *C. obtecta* (a Norfolk Is. species) and *C. kaspar* (cultivated), but not *C. rubra* or *C. stricta* (Australian species). I have observed symptoms consistent with Sudden Decline in *C. banksii* (Mt Messenger, Orongoronga Ra, Totaranui) and I have both observed and received reports of decline in *C. indivisa* (Mts Ruapehu and Taranaki and cultivated specimens) and *C. pumilio* (Hakarimata Ra, urban Auckland). *C. banksii* x *australis* hybrids are also prone. I have observed a similar die-back in *Yucca gloriosa* (a distantly related species to cabbage tree) in many individuals from North Cape to Nelson. It is important however not to confuse all cases of ill-thrift or die-back as Sudden Decline.

Pathogen hypothesis

I described my support for the MLO cause as a "working hypothesis" in order to get beyond the debate into conservation measures, because in fact Sudden Decline is not so important overall as "Slow Decline" caused by ecological dysfunction.

Two circumstantial observations influence my view in favour of an MLO cause of Sudden Decline. First, the death of seemingly perfectly healthy, young adult trees which lack any obvious environmental stress; secondly the symptomatic similarity and often close geographical association with Flax Yellow Leaf, a known MLO disease.

Landcare Research NZ Ltd has several current research projects (for completion June 1994) to further test the MLO hypothesis: the distribution of MLO in the