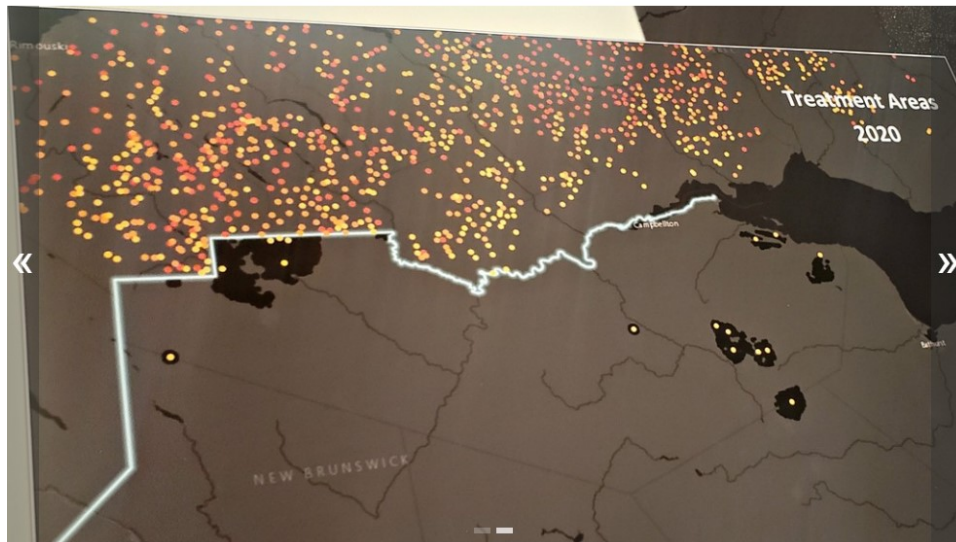


NEWS

Budworm treatment will continue in spite of COVID-19



Work will continue this summer on the spruce budworm program being undertaken by the Healthy Forests Partnership, with appropriate precautions being taken for COVID-19. This map shows the massive number of budworm outbreaks in Quebec, compared to the few in New Brunswick.

Photo: Submitted

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Tim Jaques | The Tribune

A program to control the spread of spruce budworm in New Brunswick will proceed this year, with precautions being taken for COVID-19.

"It would be fair to say it [COVID-19] is going to affect the way we do our work," said Chris Norfolk, director of forest planning and stewardship with the Department of Natural Resources and Energy Development.

"We still plan to proceed with all of our research and treatment activity for this year."

The Healthy Forest Partnership, in which the department is a partner along with other provincial governments academics, the forest industry, and the federal government, has been battling spruce budworm in the province since 2014 by treating "hotspots," which are localized break-outs of budworm larvae. Besides actually fighting the budworm in the forests, it is conducting research.

The spruce budworm is native to much of North America. It turns into a moth, but while it is still at the larval or caterpillar stage, it eats conifer needles, mainly fir and spruce.

There is a massive outbreak in Quebec, with over 9.5-million hectares defoliated, from which the adult moths have been flying into New Brunswick in sometimes enormous swarms. The partnership seeks to treat hotspots quickly in order to prevent a recurrence of the huge budworm outbreaks that ravaged the province's conifer forests in the 1950s and the 1970s.

Quebec is putting a hold on its own program this year due to COVID-19, but Norfolk said the partnership was going to come up with precautions, rather than give up the season.

"Right now the top focus for us is coming up with safe working procedures to keep our foresters and our technicians and our pilots and everyone else safe and prevent the spread of COVID," he said.

"It'll likely end up looking a little different for the folks who are working on the ground, but certainly we're going to continue."

Norfolk said the matter is being looked at with Public Health and Worksafe New Brunswick to determine the exact procedures that will have to be followed.


"Part of the concern is going to be around physical distancing when we're travelling. We have some guidance right now from Worksafe and from central government on how we can use PPE [personal protective equipment], whether it is a mask or face shield. Active screening [of employees] is going to be another very important component of how we do business this year in situations where we can't maintain physical distance," he said, adding the "active screening" will involve a series of questions about health symptoms and travel history.

Norfolk said COVID-19 did not have much impact on the start of operations, although there will be more time than normal taken on health and safety training for staff. The work is also dependent on the weather, how the budworm are developing, and how the trees are developing in June.

He said since 2014, the largest summer treatment project the partnership had was over 200,000 hectares in 2018, but this year, it will be only 30,000 hectares, mainly in Restigouche County near the Quebec border and south of Campbellton in the interior, with one spot east of Bathurst.

Norfolk said with the treatment suspended on the Quebec outbreak, researchers will "definitely" be on the lookout for invasions of large swarms of the moths, which lay the eggs that end up being the destructive spruce budworm caterpillars. While the actual swarms of moths cannot themselves be stopped, researchers have a variety of techniques to track where they go, and what effect they may have on New Brunswick forests once they start laying eggs.

Localized hot spots found to have high concentrations of budworm are treated with Btk (short for *Bacillus thuringiensis var. kurstaki*), and Tebufenozide.

Both are used in residential settings and in organic farming. The first is a naturally occurring bacterium, and has been used for years to kill tent caterpillars. The second is a natural insect growth regulator that disrupts the caterpillar's regular growth pattern. 

Norfolk said the goal is to contain the population until the outbreaks eventually subside naturally, and thereby reduce damage to conifer forests.