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Twelve Days of Arkansas Agriculture: Pest Experts Protect Arkansas's Crops from Invasive Insects and Diseases

LITTLE ROCK, AR – Every seasoned farmer or landowner knows that pests and diseases can lead to crop damage and yield loss. Pest surveys are an active strategy used by experts at the Arkansas Agriculture Department (AAD) to protect Arkansas's largest industry from both native and exotic pests.

Arkansas is the leading rice producing state in the country, producing more than 50% of all rice grown in the United States, with approximately 1.17 million acres planted in 2017. This leading crop, however, can be home to a host of exotic pests including Asiatic rice borer, Egyptian cottonworm, Cotton cutworm, and Rice stem nematode and others. Three experts from the Agriculture Department's Plant Board will place and monitor traps designed to detect the presence of pests in the majority of rice growing counties by 2020. Based on previous trapping efforts, no exotic pests of rice are known to exist in Arkansas.

Trapping efforts take place during the growing season which coincides with the pest life cycle. Early detection is paramount for effective eradication efforts. If an invasive pest is discovered, Agriculture Program Manager Jake Bodart would help lead efforts to limit the spread of the pest quickly. "Our part in safeguarding the Arkansas rice industry is not only a role that protects our growers and consumers, it ensures that we are supplying families around the world with a disease-free product," he said.

Arkansas has more than 19 million acres of forest, approximately 56% of the state's land area. The Southern Pine Beetle is a native pest historically known to impact southern pine, another top crop in Arkansas's agriculture industry. Specially designed beetle traps are placed in counties with a high volume of southern pine trees to monitor for the insect. Pine beetle traps are baited with a pheromone to lure the pest. Traps are checked routinely in spring months by Arkansas Forestry Commission personnel and any findings are inspected by Forest Health Specialist Chandler Barton.

Aerial detection is another tool used to detect pests. Barton coordinates annual flights searching for evidence of southern pine beetle and Ips beetles noticeable by brown leaves or other widespread damage to the tree canopy. The most recent southern pine beetle infestation occurred in 1995-1996, and early detection would ensure that another outbreak could be quickly controlled. "Sustaining forest health is our primary goal. We stay updated on movement and outbreaks in surrounding states, and keep a close eye to ensure that no changes to Arkansas forests need a closer look," says Barton.

This release is the second edition to the Twelve Days of Arkansas Agriculture campaign, which highlights some of the programs and services provided by the AAD that support our state's agriculture industry. Follow each of the 12 stories by searching the #12DaysofARAgriculture hashtag, or visit aad.arkansas.gov. The AAD is dedicated to the development and implementation of policies and programs for Arkansas agriculture and forestry to keep its farmers and ranchers competitive in national and international markets while ensuring safe food, fiber, and forest products for the citizens of the state and nation.

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