by Anne Schwartz
Wednesday, August 20, 2003 12:00 AM -

Bush administration budget cuts could set back efforts to eliminate the Asian long-horned beetle from the New York City area, leaving the city and the Northeast at risk for widespread damage to parks, forests and street and backyard trees, as well as to the maple syrup, lumber, fruit-growing, and tourism industries. Funding for the eradication program , run by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in cooperation with local and state agencies, was cut to $26 million this year from $50 million last year.

The tree-killing beetle, first found in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in 1996, was believed to have stowed away in wooden packing material used in shipments from China. It has since spread to a number of locations throughout New York City, including Central Park, Flushing Meadows Park, and Forest Park, as well as Long Island and New Jersey. A separate infestation was discovered in the Chicago area in 1998. Almost 6,000 trees in the New York City area have been cut and burned in the effort to wipe out the pest. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says the beetle has the potential to cause more devastation nationwide than Dutch elm disease, chestnut blight, and the gypsy moth combined.

As a result of the budget cuts, the service has had to reduce eradication efforts, particularly in Brooklyn and Queens, where it eliminated contracts with outside tree services that provided bucket trucks and tree-climbers to examine trees and also applied preventative pesticide treatments. Last year, the pesticide imidacloprid was injected into 134,000 healthy host trees â€“ maples, ash, and other species preferred by the pest â€“ in the entire New York quarantine zone, the areas of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and Long Island where the beetle has been found. This year, the service treated 18,000 trees only in Manhattan and Islip, focusing on places where it believes the pest is contained and could be eliminated entirely. "Ideally, we would like to treat all non-infested host trees," said USDA spokesperson Daniel Parry. "When we have times like this with limited funds, we want to work from the outermost boundaries and compress the infestation inward."

Representatives Anthony Weiner and Joseph Crowley, who represent Congressional districts in Brooklyn and Queens, are calling on the federal Office of Management and Budget to restore emergency funding it has provided in the past for the beetle eradication effort. In an August 5th letter to the budget office director, Joshua Bolton, they asked him to approve the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service’s $46 million request for the beetle eradication program.

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The service continues to conduct tree-to-tree surveys in the entire New York City quarantine zone, although at a slower pace. Trees found to be infested are destroyed and replaced with a species not attacked by the beetle. "The biggest ally in all of this is the public," said Parry, asking people to report suspected beetle infestations to the toll-free number 1-877-STOPALB. "All calls are taken seriously - an inspector will come out," he said.

Signs of the beetle are perfectly round holes (slightly larger than the diameter of a pencil) bored in trunks; piles of sawdust at the base or crotches of trees; sap and water oozing down the trunk; and the villain of this real-life horror flick itself â€“ a one to one-and-half-inch shiny black beetle with white markings and outsized black-and-white antennae. For more information check the TreesNY web site .

Van Cortlandt Park

Just hours before the deadline, Governor George Pataki signed legislation allowing the use of 48 acres of Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx for a water filtration plant. The city is under a court order requiring it to filter the water coming from the Croton Reservoir to meet federal water quality standards. After years of disputes on whether and how this should be done, the governor's decision cleared the way for the city to build a $1.3 billion plant underneath the park's Mosholu Golf Course after completing a supplemental environmental impact statement.

The governor approved the bill only after receiving assurances from Mayor Michael Bloomberg that the city would consider two other potential sites for the filtration plant in the required environmental review. The Bloomberg administration also guaranteed in writing that the governor would be included in the process that determines how $243 million promised for Bronx parks would be spent. The money, mitigation for the years-long loss of parkland and the traffic and pollution generated by the construction of the plant, was crucial in persuading Bronx politicians to vote for allowing parkland to be used for the plant.

Several large environmental groups supported the construction of the filtration plant after the city Department of Environmental Protection went on record with a promise to provide new protections for land in the Croton watershed, according to the New York Times.

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Local residents and Assemblymember Jeffrey Dinowitz, who represents the community near Van Cortlandt Park, continue to oppose the plant. In an article in the Norwood News, they charged the legislators and governor with environmental racism for agreeing to put the facility next to a low-income, ethnically mixed community with high asthma rates. Opponents of the plant question whether a fair selection process is possible now that the Van Cortlandt site has been approved by the state. Friends of Van Cortlandt Park, the group that stopped the city's first attempt to build in the park without legislative approval, may sue again if the promised environmental review is not conducted properly.

Christian DiPalermo, executive director of the citywide parks advocacy group New Yorkers for Parks, said, "The shortcuts used by the city in taking Van Cortlandt Park for this water filtration plant set an alarming precedent for future park alienation cases and place all parkland at risk." The organization will be carefully watching how the city plans to spend the $243 million promised for Bronx parks. It has urged its supporters to ask city Controller William Thompson to make sure that the money really goes to improving Bronx neighborhood parks - not Yankee Stadium (which is officially on parkland).

Anne Schwartz is a freelance writer specializing in environmental issues. Previously, she was the editor of the Audubon Activist, a news journal for environmental action published by the National Audubon Society, and an editor at The New York Botanical Garden.