AS DESTRUCTIVE CACTUS MOTH THREATENS SOUTHWEST, USDA PROPOSES REVISED RULES TO PREVENT ADDITIONAL INTRODUCTIONS OF NON-NATIVE PESTS

Invasive moth has destroyed prickly pear cacti across U.S. Southeast and is feared next in Texas; cactus mealybug also poses a threat

IMMEDIATE RELEASE [April 2, 2011] – First found in Florida in 1989, the destructive South American cactus moth (Cactoblastis cactorum) has now spread from its original accidental introduction in that state to as far north as South Carolina and as far west as Louisiana. The moth is now spreading westward toward Texas and other southwestern states. To prevent further introductions of this pest, the Texas Invasive Plant and Pest Council supports a proposed rule by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to amend its foreign quarantine regulations to prohibit the importation of prickly pear cactus nursery stock or their edible fruits and pads from countries infested with the moth.

Like many invasive species, the cactus moth is not harmful in its native habitat, but when it reaches a new area it negatively impacts the plants and animals of its introduced range. Because the cactus moth is highly successful as a means to control introduced prickly pear cacti, it has been intentionally introduced to areas with invasive cacti, including Australia, South Africa, the Caribbean, and Hawaii. As an indirect result of these widespread intentional introductions, there has been accidental spread of the insects on imported nursery stock. This accidental spread threatens native cacti as well as the animals that depend on them as a food source, throughout North America.

Originally designed to simplify the inspection process, the current USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) regulations only limit the size of plants that may be imported. APHIS concedes that the size limit regulation is not an effective measure to prevent introduction of the moth – the moths’ eggs and larvae are difficult to find during inspections and may be present on small plants.

“ iface Campbell, senior policy representative at The Nature Conservancy. “Creating awareness that the cactus moth is a real and dangerous threat in the Southwest is also important in the efforts to save the desert ecosystems in these states.”

The South American cactus moth kills prickly pear cacti (genera Opuntia and Consolea) that have flat pads. In some parts of Florida, 75 percent of the prickly pear cacti have been attacked by the moth. Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and California are home to 80 species of cacti of which are vulnerable to cactus moth. If there is a substantial loss of these cacti, there also will be an impact on the wildlife that depends of them as food supply.

Scientists are concerned about the proposed relaxation of current USDA restrictions on other kinds of cacti – those that do not host the moth. While these cactus species do not carry the risk of moving the cactus moth, they could carry a different pest – the Harrisia cactus mealybug (Hypogeococcus pungens) – which is also native to South America. This insect feeds on many species of columnar cacti, perhaps including the picturesque saguaros of Arizona. The current distribution of this mealybug includes Florida and Puerto Rico, and it has also been reported in Hawaii.

“A wide variety of cacti are part of the native flora in the American Southwest and we need to be vigilant about the cactus moth threat to our natural heritage,” says Dr. Damon Waitt, Senior Director, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center at The University of Texas. “Federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations, the nursery industry, and residents need to work together to try to prevent the spread of these invasive insects.”

North America has more than 500 columnar cactus species, some of which are already endangered because of habitat loss and degradation. Included are several species of the Pediocactus genus, rare cacti native to the Colorado Plateau region of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona. Better known cacti, such as the saguaro and organ pipe cacti, are totems of the desert and play important ecological roles in the desert ecosystem.

The USDA is accepting public comments until April 25, 2011, on the revised rules. The public can submit comments by either of the following methods:

• To submit or view comments and to view supporting and related materials available electronically, go to: http://www.regulations.gov/fdmspublic/component/main?main=DocketDetail&d=APHIS-2006-0077.
• To submit comment via mail, send one copy to: Docket No. APHIS-2006-0077, Regulatory Analysis and Development, PPD, APHIS, Station 3A-03.8, 4700 River Road, Unit 118, Riverdale, MD 20737-1238. Include in the comment a reference to Docket No. APHIS-2006-0077.