



County of St. Clair, Michigan
Administrator/Controller's Office
200 Grand River Avenue, Suite 203, Port Huron MI 48060

About the St. Clair County Spongy Moth (Gypsy Moth) Suppression Program

St. Clair County experienced a sudden and severe outbreak of spongy moth (formerly known as gypsy moth) in 2021 and in response revived the St. Clair County Spongy Moth (Gypsy Moth) Suppression Program. The 2021-2022 program is administered by Friends of the St. Clair River. The suppression program's main goal is to contract with a licensed and certified aerial pesticide applicator to assist residents with the aerial spray of Btk (*Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *kurstaki*) to qualifying areas in an effort to reduce intolerably high populations of spongy moth caterpillars. The program also provides information about additional techniques to help reduce caterpillar numbers for properties that do not qualify for the aerial spray. Aerial spray areas for 2022 have been determined using Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) guidelines and residents included in the 2022 aerial spray have been notified by mail. Regardless of whether a property qualifies for aerial spray, a combination of methods can and should be employed to combat the increase and spread of infestation.

St. Clair County Spongy Moth Suppression Program Goals:

- Reduce the nuisance of high caterpillar populations in forested residential areas
- Reduce tree stress
- Reduce the indiscriminate use of chemical controls
- Provide educational information
- Protect and improve quality of life and outdoor recreation activities

Background

Spongy moth (formerly known as gypsy moth, *Lymantria dispar*) is an exotic invasive insect that has been in North America since the late 1800's. Spongy moth caterpillars can feed on the foliage of hundreds of species of trees and shrubs, preferring oaks. Egg masses are laid in late summer and fall on tree trunks, buildings, campers, and other outdoor objects, and persist through the winter. Hundreds of spongy moth caterpillars hatch from each egg mass in late spring, and feed for two months in summer. Each caterpillar can cause extensive defoliation of the trees when their numbers are high. Caterpillars form a cocoon in late summer, emerge as adults about two weeks later, mate, lay egg masses and die. Only the caterpillar life stage feeds and causes damage.

The damage from spongy moth caterpillar feeding includes stress and defoliation to trees and forested areas, and they are a messy nuisance to homeowners and outdoor enthusiasts by reducing shade from trees and by producing large amounts of frass (excrement), leaf fragments, and squirming caterpillars. The hairs from egg masses, caterpillars, and adult moths can also cause allergic reactions in sensitive individuals.

Btk Information

Spongy moth populations are cyclical, with large outbreaks occurring every decade or so and generally lasting two to four years before collapsing naturally or by management actions. One option for suppressing spongy moth caterpillars during a severe outbreak is an aerial spray of *Bacillus thuringiensis* var. *kurstaki* (Btk). This product is used to reduce high populations of spongy moth caterpillars at sites that meet specific guidelines for treatment. Spongy moths **cannot** be eradicated, but they can be suppressed to tolerable levels. Btk is a naturally occurring bacterium found in the soil and on plants and is **not harmful to pets, birds, fish, plants, beneficial insects, or humans.**

Thousands of Bt varieties exist in nature, each with its own unique characteristics. Though Bt products can be highly effective in controlling specific insects, they have little impact on other animals, and pose significantly less risk of affecting other organisms than conventional chemical insecticide sprays. Btk is commonly used by organic gardeners and farmers to control caterpillar pests of fruits and vegetables. Btk has been used for spongy moth control in the northeastern U.S. since 1961 and in Michigan since 1985.

Btk specifically targets only caterpillars at a young age. It is applied to the tree foliage when the caterpillars are young (usually in May), and the caterpillars die when they ingest the Btk as they feed. Alternative techniques, such as tree banding, egg mass scraping, and soapy water sprays, are also options that help reduce spongy moth populations. St. Clair County's Suppression Program recommends the use of a combination of methods.

You can help!

It is important to communicate all spongy moth infestations to the St. Clair County Spongy Moth Suppression Program. Egg mass surveys at individual properties were done in late fall to determine the level of infestation for the coming year and whether a property qualifies for aerial spray. The 2022 aerial spray areas have already been determined. Residents are encouraged to report any new caterpillar sightings from May through July for the 2023 suppression program to the contacts listed below.

Report Spongy Moth Caterpillars

Online: www.stclaircounty.org/Caterpillars

Email: gypsymoth@stclaircounty.org

Phone: 810.294.4965

For more information about Spongy Moth life cycle, Bt and other suppression activities, visit:

www.stclaircounty.org/Caterpillars

