

It isn't a question of if, but when the Spotted Lanternfly will land on Colorado and other parts of the West. That's the dire warning from entomologists locally and nationwide, who say that this invasive, plant-hopping insect that can grow rather large and has no natural enemies cannot only damage the state's forests, but devastate its crops as well, particularly the region's grape vines and peach trees.

"They're really horrible because they have a piercing, sucking mouth part that acts like a needle that they stick into the plant and suck the life out of it," said Meredith Shrader, a Grand Junction-based entomologist for Colorado State University's Extension Service.

"You can imagine for a grape vine or a fruit tree having thousands of little straws stuck in you that gets all the nutrients," she said. "So the sugars aren't going to the grapes, they get sour. That's what the plants use as energy. They are weakening and stressing them."

First found on a southwestern Pennsylvania farm in 2014 that quickly spread to numerous adjoining states — and now are detected on both coasts — the insect can spread rapidly, feeding on at least 70 different species of trees, vines and shrubs, including fruit trees, hops, grapevines and hardwoods. As a result, it has the potential to wreak havoc on numerous agricultural industries, including timber, wineries, breweries, plant nurseries and fruit orchards.

A Pennsylvania State University study in December 2019 estimated that the insect's negative financial impact to that state's agricultural industry could rise to as much as \$324 million a year and cost thousands of jobs.

Native to areas in China and Vietnam, the insect doesn't discriminate about where it will lay its eggs, leaving them on just about any surface at the end of their annual life cycle in early to late fall.

That means it can and likely will spread through interstate travel, including on recreational vehicles, which is why the Grand Valley Pest Control District, like others of its kind, are moving to add it to its list of invasive species to watch.

"Our fear with this insect is that it lays its eggs on anything," Shrader said. "It's incredibly stupid in that fact, but incredibly unique. They can lay their eggs on non-host things like RVs or patio furniture. That's how we believe it's being transported, by human activity."

As soon as it hatches, the insects that can grow to be about an inch long and after it develops its wings will attach itself to plants and begin sucking out whatever sugars it can find at all stages of its life.

Though moth-like in appearance at its adult stage, and despite having a wingspan of two to three inches, the insect isn't a great flier. Instead, it prefers to crawl, but also is a strong jumper.

That's why it's particularly devastating on plants that create more sugar, such as grape vines and peach trees, Shrader said.

She said that states, extension services and local pest districts in areas of the nation where the insect hasn't yet arrived are still working out ways to combat it, including starting a public education campaign to alert people — including homeowners — on how to identify and kill them.

“All of the states know about it, and as it appears in their state or detected next to it then people start really getting concerned,” Shrader said. “In Colorado, we don't have it yet, but we are a definite tourist destination. It's only a matter of time before an RV from Pennsylvania comes to our state.”

When it comes to that, the only real good news is that the Spotted Lanternfly is susceptible to standard insecticides.

Part of that education campaign includes asking tourists to inspect their vehicles before departing to another location, and scrape off any eggs that may have been laid.

Montana Cohn, coordinator of the pest district that encompasses Palisade and parts of Orchard Mesa, told the Mesa County Board of Commissioners last Monday that several district members want to get a jump on the insect before it becomes a problem here.

That calls for landowners to vote on a special ballot measure to do so.

Ballots for that measure are to go out to landowners starting on Monday if commissioners approve it at their next regular meeting that same day, as they are expected to do. The measure does not propose raising taxes to battle the new bug, but just to alert everyone in the district as to how serious it could be to their fruit operations, and to help it be ready when the bug does arrive.

“The vote will add the pest to the list of regulated species, allowing enforcement should that pest make its way to Colorado ... (which) is expected to happen,” Cohn said. “It's no additional cost to the residents. The Grand Valley Pest Control District is mill-levy funded, and the vote is given to all landowners of five or more acres.”

Cohn said that about 17,000 tons of fruit are harvested in Colorado each year, contributing about \$40 million to the local economy. The majority of that fruit is grown in Mesa County, he said.