

People & Places

Asian giant hornets thrust entomologist into spotlight

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

It was not astonishing to Sven-Erik Spichiger that the Asian giant hornet popped up in Washington state.

Shortly before the insect, sensationally dubbed the “murder hornet,” was found near the U.S.-Canadian border in 2019, the Washington State Department of Agriculture printed a booklet on “invasive pests.”

The rogues gallery included *Vespa mandarinia*, the world’s largest hornet. The fearsome decapitators of honey bees had never been confirmed in North America. But Spichiger, the agriculture department’s managing entomologist, was expecting them to arrive by ship.

“The way our trade routes are set up, I’m surprised it didn’t happen before,” he said.

Imported delicacy?

The hornets that were found in British Columbia and northwest Washington could have been stow-aways — or they could have escaped.

“Asian giant hornets are a sought-after food source,” Spichiger said. “It’s possible people brought them here on purpose.”

“You wonder whether somebody tried to get a colony going to enjoy them,” said Spichiger, who was tempted into trying raw hornet pupae. “It tastes like any other insect,” he said.

Reluctant spokesman

For two years, Spichiger, 49, has been the introverted but quotable scientist informing the public about the campaign to repel Asian giant hornets.

He reported the missteps, victories, surprises and lucky breaks. He says he doesn’t relish the role he’s been thrust into, but likes that people are listening and on-guard.

So far, with the public’s help, Spichiger and colleagues, including fellow department entomologist Chris Looney, have found and destroyed four nests, all



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Washington State Department of Agriculture managing entomologist Sven-Erik Spichiger holds a tray of Asian giant hornet specimens. Spichiger spearheads the state’s response to the hornet, but it’s not the invasive insect that he calls the “pest of a generation.”

near each other in Whatcom County.

Spichiger said in November that he was hopeful the hornets have been contained to a small area along the border. Murder hornets, however, remain a story of national interest.

“We expected people to be interested. We didn’t expect people to be this interested for this long,” he said. “We’re not used to people being interested in what we do.”

Boyhood interest

Spichiger traces his interest in insects to the summer he was 8 and helped his cousin earn a Boy Scout merit badge by collecting green dragonflies. He never stopped collecting.

He earned a bachelor’s degree in entomology at Penn State University and a master’s degree in the same subject at Clemson University.

A Pennsylvania native, Spichiger worked his way up to managing entomologist at the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. By 2018, he

was attending lots of meetings and doing paperwork.

A bug crisis arose while he was on jury duty, and his staff handled the problem without him. That’s when he knew it was time for a change.

Spichiger applied, as a lark, for an equivalent position in Washington.

He was offered the job, so he and his wife, Kuen Kuen, moved west, where the mountains and fish are bigger. “We feel like we’re on vacation every day,” he said.

Spichiger said he became an entomologist for the “wondrous variety.”

There’s a new infestation of Japanese beetles to attack next spring in Yakima County. “Japanese beetles could be a disaster. It could be ho-hum,” Spichiger said.

Spotted lanternfly

There’s another insect that Spichiger would never describe as humdrum. He says it “could be one of the most harmful pests in our generation.”

It’s the spotted lanternfly.

There’s never been a credible sighting in Washington, but Spichiger fought the pest in Pennsylvania, and he expects to do so again.

“It is coming,” he said.

In 2014, Spichiger, as Pennsylvania’s entomologist, checked out a report of an unusual insect. He found hundreds of spotted lanternflies on *Ailanthus altissima*, commonly known as tree of heaven.

Spotted lanternflies prefer those trees, which are fast-growing, but they also like grapes, apples, Christmas trees and many other crops.

Until Spichiger saw that tree, the insect had never been confirmed in the U.S. Reflecting a few years later, Spichiger said the report “gave us a chance.”

It was, however, the pest that got away. “We didn’t hit it hard enough,” Spichiger said. “We should have nuked the area.”

If that sounds harsh, consider this: The spotted lanternfly infestation grew from 174 square miles in 2016 to about

Western Innovator

SVEN-ERIK SPICHIGER

Position: Washington State Department of Agriculture managing entomologist

Previously: Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture managing entomologist

Education: Bachelor’s degree in entomology, Penn State University; master’s degree in entomology, Clemson University

3,000 square miles in 2017, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

In 2018, a Pennsylvania congressman complained the pest was “wreaking havoc” on agriculture in 13 counties. The USDA announced it would spend \$17.5 million to contain the bug.

The pest continued to spread. Penn State researchers in late 2019 estimated the potential economic damage. Worst-case, if the pest gets established, annual losses are projected to be \$554 million.

Spotted lanternflies spread by laying egg masses on the surface of items that can travel around the country. The USDA says spotted lanternflies are now in 11 states, the farthest west being Indiana.

Spichiger said he’s watching Cleveland, where spotted lanternflies were found in August. He said that he expects that once they hit Chicago, they will spread west on rail cars.

“Once it gets here, we’re looking at managing it, living with it,” he said.

By contrast, the Asian giant hornet “will never be the pest of a generation,” he said.

“It’s just the one people are interested in.”

Perrydale FFA leads effort to help feed needy families

By **GEOFF PARKS**
For the Capital Press

PERRYDALE, Ore. — Students are back in the thick of the Perrydale FFA chapter’s 2021 Food For All program to help feed needy families with local, farm-raised fruits and vegetables.

Food For All was originated by the Perrydale FFA 23 years ago. It typically involves the entire 300-plus-member student body, from kindergartners to seniors, who all come together from November through the end of the year collecting, packaging and distributing donated food.

COVID-19 restrictions kept many of the students from working last year. In their stead, former Perrydale ag adviser Kirk Hutchinson, coordinator of the event since its inception, enlisted students, teachers, community members and others.

This year, the students were back in force. Perrydale FFA President Jenna Tomp-



Geoff Parks/For the Capital Press
Left to right, Johnathan Propes, 15, reporter for the Perrydale FFA; Rachel Propes, 18, treasurer, and Jenna Tompkins, 17, president, bag root vegetables for the annual Perrydale FFA-hosted Food For All program.

kins, 17, said during packaging operations at the school that kindergartners and elementary-age students are given jobs such as bagging onions by count and other

easier tasks.

Middle school students sort and bag mixed vegetables and potatoes by weight.

“All seven class periods and 10 agriculture classes will be packing for the next two weeks,” Tompkins said on Nov. 7. “As long as I’ve been at Perrydale I’ve packed food.”

She said Perrydale has adjusted and taken more time to plan ahead and implement safety protocols so students can still contribute to the efforts despite COVID-19 worries.

“We have to be more mindful of the capacity in the packing areas,” she added. “In previous years we could really pack them in and have everybody working.”

High school students stack and wrap pallets for shipment and can do other kinds of heavier work. Those in FFA leadership prepare the way for the yearly event through their duties as “ambassadors.”

Johnathan Propes, 15,

Perrydale FFA’s reporter, explained that Perrydale and the other eight schools in the district that participate in Food For All activities — Dallas, Dayton, Amity, Central, Yamhill-Carlton, Newberg, Sheridan and Willamina — go on “partner visits” to farmers, businesses and other donors.

Those visits lay the groundwork for collecting, packaging and distributing the food.

“We coordinate out of Perrydale but do the packaging and distribution from each of those schools to help their local communities,” Hutchinson said.

The goal is to collect and distribute food to nearly 8,000 needy families statewide with the help of local food banks and other charitable organizations. Their goal is providing 40 pounds of mixed vegetables and fruit to each needy family.

Last year nearly 190 tons of food were distributed

despite the coronavirus disruptions. This year’s goal is 175 tons, though the final figure will likely be higher, Hutchinson said.

A problem for the Perrydale site is capacity, Tompkins said.

“We’re kind of at maximum packing capacity here,” she said. “Our schools have only so much space. We can’t really go over about 200 tons. We have a new barn here but can’t really get to it with forklifts or machinery in this bad weather.”

Rachel Propes, 18, treasurer of the Perrydale FFA, said this year’s heatwave reduced the size and quantity of the carrot crop in the valley, but larger onions, parsnips and rutabagas have taken up the slack.

“Food For All gives food to any who ask for it,” she said. “So if there’s an organization near us (such as the Knights of Columbus) that asks for food, we give it to them” to distribute.

CALENDAR

Submit upcoming ag-related events on www.capitalpress.com or by email to newsroom@capitalpress.com.

FRIDAY-WEDNESDAY JAN. 7-12

American Farm Bureau Convention: Georgia World Congress Center, 285 Andrew Young International Blvd., Atlanta, Ga. This is an opportunity to help set the agenda for the leading voice of agriculture in Washington, D.C., and much more. Participate in educational workshops to advance your leadership skills, expand your business acumen and gain insight into the trends and realities impacting food

production. Website: <https://www.fb.org/events/afbf-convention/>

WEDNESDAY-FRIDAY JAN. 12-14

Northwest Agricultural Show: Oregon State Fair and Exposition Center, 2330 17th St. NE, Salem. Join us at the fairgrounds for an old-fashioned farm show. We’ll also have a full slate of exhibitors, presentations, seminars and events. Website: <https://northwestagshow.com/>

SUNDAY-TUESDAY JAN. 16-18

NFU Women’s Conference: Holiday Inn and Suites Nashville Downtown Conven-

tion Center. Topics will include business management, leadership, community building and more. Website: <https://nfu.org/womensconference/>

TUESDAY-WEDNESDAY JAN. 18-19

The VISION Conference 2022: Renaissance Phoenix Glendale Hotel and Spa, Glendale, Ariz. The conference engages leaders throughout agricultural technology to address the dynamic recent advances in technology, systems and platforms enabling interconnected solutions from farm to retail. Website: <http://www.thevisionconference.com>

WEDNESDAY-THURSDAY JAN. 19-20

2022 Northwest Hay Expo: Three Rivers Convention Center, Kennewick, Wash. Sponsored by the Washington State Hay Growers Association, this is a one-stop information center for all things hay. Website: www.wa-hay.org

2022 Idaho Potato Conference

Idaho State University, student union building, Pocatello. The conference includes educational presentations and a trade show. Website: www.uidaho.edu

SUNDAY-WEDNESDAY JAN. 23-26

Dairy Forum 2022: J.W. Mar-

riott Desert Springs Resort & Spa, Palm Desert, Calif. Presented by International Dairy Foods Association, the forum will feature what’s new, now and next for dairy foods. Website: www.idfa.org

THURSDAY JAN. 27

USBI Biochar in the Woods Seminar (online): 9 a.m.-4 p.m. At the day-long, online seminar and the following field day events in Butte County, Calif. (free), you will learn how to make and use biochar onsite to increase the water holding capacity and resilience of forest soils. Website: <https://bit.ly/3q1Ejji>

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