

LOCAL, STATE & REGION

Hungry grasshoppers spurred by U.S. drought threaten rangeland

Scientists are launching largest killing campaign since the 1980s

BY MATTHEW BROWN
Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — A punishing drought in the U.S. West is drying up waterways, sparking wildfires and leaving farmers scrambling for water.

Next up: a plague of voracious grasshoppers.

Federal agriculture officials are launching what could become their largest grasshopper-killing campaign since the 1980s amid an outbreak of the drought-loving insects that cattle ranchers fear will strip bare public and private rangelands.

In central Montana's Phillips County, more than 50 miles from the nearest town, Frank Wiederrick said large numbers of grasshoppers started showing up on prairie surrounding his ranch in recent days. Already they're beginning to denude trees around his house.

"They're everywhere," Wiederrick said. "Drought and grasshoppers go together, and they are cleaning us out."

Grasshoppers thrive in warm, dry weather, and populations already were up last year, setting the stage for an even bigger outbreak in 2021. Such outbreaks could become more common as climate change shifts rainfall patterns, scientists said.

To blunt the grasshoppers' economic damage, the U.S. Department of Agriculture this week began aerial spraying of the pesticide diflubenzuron to kill grasshopper nymphs before they develop into adults. Approximately 3,000 square miles in Montana are expected to be sprayed, roughly twice the size of Rhode Island.

Agriculture officials had seen this year's infestation coming, after a 2020 survey found dense concentrations of adult grasshoppers across about 55,000 square miles in the West. A 2021 grasshopper "hazard map" shows densities of at least 15 insects per square yard in large areas of Montana, Wyoming and Oregon and portions of Idaho, Arizona, Colorado



U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service via AP
A male migratory grasshopper. Besides feeding on grasslands, large grasshopper populations can also devastate cultivated crops such as alfalfa, wheat, barley and corn.

and Nebraska.

Left unaddressed, federal officials said the agricultural damage from grasshoppers could become so severe it could drive up beef and crop prices.

The program's scale has alarmed environmentalists who say widespread spraying will kill numerous insects, including spiders and other grasshopper predators as well as struggling species such as monarch butterflies. They're also concerned the pesticides could ruin organic farms adjacent to spray zones.

"We're talking about natural areas being sprayed; this is not cropland," said Sharon Selvaggio, a former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist now with the Xercs Society, a conservation group focused on insects.

Government officials say they will spray pesticides in low concentrations and reduce the area treated by alternately spraying a strip of rangeland, then skipping the next strip. The intent is to kill grasshoppers passing between strips while sparing other insects that don't move as far.

If spraying is delayed and grasshoppers grow larger and more resilient, federal officials could resort to two more toxic pesticides — carbaryl and malathion, according to government documents.

Selvaggio said pesticides could drift into areas not being targeted and kill beneficial insects such as

bees that pollinate crops. "The toxicity is more than enough to kill bees," she said. "This is not adequate protection."

Organic farmers are divided on spraying. Some are concerned about losing their organic certification for years if they inadvertently get pesticides on their crops, while others are willing to tolerate spraying out of deference to their neighbors' problems, said Jamie Ryan Lockman, director of Organic Montana.

The trade group isn't going to challenge the spraying but wants organic farmers protected and for the government to research alternatives to chemicals for future outbreaks.

As this year's crop of grasshoppers emerges, they're starting to compete with cattle for food in arid eastern Montana, where single ranches can sprawl over thousands of acres of private and public rangeland.

The grasshoppers start eating tender plants first, then move on to fully-grown plants and the seed heads of grain crops, killing them, said Marko Manoukian, a Montana State University agriculture extension agent in Phillips County. Farmers can collect insurance on damaged crops, whereas ranchers have no recourse when the grasshoppers remove vegetation from public lands.

"They are competing against our food supplies," said Manoukian.

TODAY

Today is Friday, June 25, the 176th day of 2021. There are 189 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On **June 25, 1962**, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that recitation of a state-sponsored prayer in New York State public schools was unconstitutional.

In **1788**, Virginia ratified the U.S. Constitution.

In **1876**, Lt. Col. Colonel George A. Custer and his 7th Cavalry were wiped out by Sioux and Cheyenne Indians in the Battle of the Little Bighorn in Montana.

In **1942**, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower was designated Commanding General of the European Theater of Operations during World War II. Some 1,000 British Royal Air Force bombers raided Bremen, Germany.

In **1947**, "The Diary of a Young Girl," the personal journal of Anne Frank, a German-born Jewish girl hiding with her family from the Nazis in Amsterdam during World War II, was first published.

In **1950**, war broke out in Korea as forces from the communist North invaded the South.

In **1973**, former White House Counsel John W. Dean began testifying before the Senate Watergate Committee, implicating top administration officials, including President Richard Nixon as well as himself, in the Watergate scandal and cover-up.

In **1981**, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that male-only draft registration was constitutional.

In **1990**, the U.S. Supreme Court, in its first "right-to-die" decision, ruled that family members could be barred from ending the lives of persistently comatose relatives who had not made their wishes known conclusively.

In **1996**, a truck bomb killed 19 Americans and injured hundreds at a U.S. military housing complex in Saudi Arabia.

In **2003**, the Recording Industry Association of America threatened to sue hundreds of individual computer users who were illegally sharing music files online.

In **2009**, death claimed Michael Jackson, the "King of Pop," in Los Angeles at age 50 and actor Farrah Fawcett in Santa Monica, California, at age 62.

In **2015**, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld nationwide tax subsidies under President Barack Obama's health care overhaul in a 6-3 ruling that preserved health insurance for millions of Americans.

Ten years ago: A suicide car bomber blasted a small clinic in eastern Afghanistan, causing the building to collapse and killing some three dozen people.

Five years ago: Pope Francis visited Armenia, where he recognized the Ottoman-era slaughter of Armenians as a genocide, prompting a harsh rebuttal from Turkey.

One year ago: Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said the state would "pause" its aggressive reopening as it dealt with a surge in coronavirus cases and hospitalizations. A government watchdog found that nearly 1.1 million relief payments totaling some \$1.4 billion in the government's coronavirus aid program went to dead people. Two U.S. warships, the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and the USS San Jacinto, notched their 161st consecutive day at sea, breaking the previous Navy record, as ships were ordered to avoid port visits because of the coronavirus. Restaurant chain Chuck E. Cheese filed for bankruptcy protection. Census Bureau figures showed that for the first time, nonwhites and Hispanics were a majority of people under age 16 in 2019.

Today's Birthdays: Actor June Lockhart is 96. Civil rights activist James Meredith is 88. R&B singer Eddie Floyd is 84. Actor Barbara Montgomery is 82. Actor Mary Beth Peil is 81. Basketball Hall of Famer Willis Reed is 79. Singer Carly Simon is 76. Rock musician Ian McDonald (Foreigner; King Crimson) is 75. Actor-comedian Jimmie Walker is 74. Actor-director Michael Lembeck is 73. Rock singer Tim Finn is 69. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor is 67. Rock musician David Paich (Toto) is 67. Actor Michael Sabatino is 66. Actor-writer-director Ricky Gervais is 60. Actor John Benjamin Hickey is 58. Actor Erica Gimpel is 57. Basketball Hall of Famer Dikembe Mutombo is 55. Rapper-producer Richie Rich is 54. Actor Angela Kinsey is 50. Rock musician Mike Kroeger (Nickelback) is 49. Rock musician Mario Calire is 47. Actor Linda Cardellini is 46. Actor Busy Philipps is 42. Jazz musician Joey Alexander is 18.

—Associated Press

Brown commutes sentences of 41 inmates who battled wildfires

BY NOELLE CROMBIE
The Oregonian

Gov. Kate Brown has commuted the sentences of 41 prisoners who helped fight wildfires that burned across the state last year, the Oregon Department of Corrections confirmed Wednesday.

Of those she identified for commutation, 23, including eight women, are expected to be released on July 22 provided they have housing in place.

Brown shaved 12 months off

the sentences for the remaining 18 prisoners, including three women. Three are serving mandatory minimum sentences under Oregon's Measure 11, according to the Department of Corrections.

Brown said in March she would consider commuting the sentences of those who took part in firefighting efforts last summer. The group she commuted was pulled from a potential pool of 164 prisoners, according to the Department of

Corrections. To be eligible for consideration, candidates must have worked the 2020 wildfire season. They had to have good conduct for the past 12 months and a housing plan upon release. The corrections agency said they assessed candidates based on their "safety, security, or compliance risk to the community."

The wildfires torched more than 4,000 residences and burned more than 1 million acres across the state.

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