

Expert plan to save palm trees...

By SANDEEP SINGH GREWAL , Posted on » Tuesday, April 22, 2014

AN expert claims to have made a scientific breakthrough that could stop an invasive beetle from potentially wiping out half of Bahrain's palm trees.

More than 4,500 red palm weevils, which have already damaged over 25 per cent of the country's date palms, have been wiped out in the space of six months.

However, a man involved in tackling the problem is proposing a special task force to eliminate the pest - saying shortages in products used to combat the problem are hindering efforts.

He also claims to have discovered for **the first time how weevils penetrate the trees**, which could give agriculturalists the edge.

"There is a problem in supplies and in effectively dealing with the infestations that have escalated," warned Crown Prince's Court agricultural department manager Sanjay Jamale.

"Authorities in Abu Dhabi managed to trap about two million red palm weevils last year and Saudi Arabia has 1,500 specialists in farms working to save millions of palm trees.

"There needs to be a special task force set up in Bahrain to deal with the problem, which is escalating and if not stopped in the next 15 years could affect half of the date palms in Bahrain."

The red palm weevil is a small beetle that has ravaged date palms across the Gulf.

It lays eggs on the trees and the larvae that develops burrows into the trunk, slowly decimating it.

The pest is thought to have been brought to the Middle East from Pakistan and was first reported in Bahrain in 1995.

The Municipalities and Urban Planning Affairs Ministry launched a pilot project covering 7,500 trees in July last year to deal with the problem, inserting organic neem oil into tree trunks.

"We managed to get rid of a total of 4,601 red palm weevils in three main gardens located in different parts of the country from October till March," said Mr Jamale.

"The majority of the pests were found in Sniyan garden in Manama, with also cases in Muharraq, Sitra and other areas."

He added preventive measures had been taken to save 86 mature date palms.

"Another 72 trees were treated and saved," he said.

"Bahraini date palm cultivators are now facing an outbreak that threatens to wipe out the tree, which is a cultural icon dating back 5,000 years."

"Weevils are capable of taking down entire plantations and eat away at the inside of trees without farmers even knowing about it.

Mr Jamale said at least 23 different varieties of dates were grown in Bahrain, but **trees affected by weevils did not show symptoms until they were infested or collapsed**.

Measures to tackle the problem include **injecting or spraying organic neem oil** on affected areas, treating the infected tree's crown by spraying insecticide and pheromone traps to lure away weevils.

However, Mr Jamale said he had made a **breakthrough** with his colleague Manoj Ingole in discovering how weevils enter at the base, stem and crown of a palm tree.

"Based on our research, we found that the **insect laid eggs on the cover of the male and female flower**, through which it enters the flower stem," he said.

"This is a major breakthrough as no-one previously could explain how these insects entered the date palm and began infestation."

He explained that once a weevil-infested crown was discovered, six to 10 holes were drilled below the flower to inject insecticide.

The weevil is attracted to the smell of the flower, so male flowers are cut and insecticide is sprayed on it.

"Plastic bags are used to cover the flower to prevent the smell from spreading and after few weeks the stem becomes hard, which makes it difficult for the insect to lay eggs," said Mr Jamale.

He said female weevils lay close to 250 eggs on the soft tissue of a palm tree and the larvae remain inside the stem, even spreading to other palms. sandy@gn.com.bh