

Dimilin too dangerous for gypsy moth battle

By MICHELE S. BYERS

For most people, the idea of spraying pesticides from airplanes flying over residential neighborhoods simply doesn't seem like a good idea. History is littered with examples of supposedly safe chemicals that turned out to be anything but safe. So why not err on the side of caution?

The state recently considered the use of aerial spraying of the pesticide Dimilin to control the gypsy moth caterpillar population on state and private lands in forested residential areas of Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May and Ocean counties. That would have overturned a 20-year-old ban on aerial spraying of Dimilin in populated areas. Thanks to the environmental community, New Jersey opted not to use this dangerous chemical.

In infants, Dimilin has been shown to reduce the level of oxygen in the bloodstream, causing "blue baby syndrome." It also breaks down into a probable human carcinogen.

Dimilin is toxic enough that the federal government advises not to spray it at times when children are most likely to be in the area. Unfortunately, short of a full-scale evacuation, there's no way to ensure this recommended standard can be met in the residential areas. Aerial spraying usually occurs in early morning, when winds are light and people are out and about commuting. Even during school hours, young children are home; others are on school grounds adjacent to forest patches and accidents happen.

Dimilin is also a specifically poor

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choice for use in the Pinelands. It breaks down best in alkaline water and soils. The high soil acidity in the Pinelands delays chemical breakdown for up to two years, posing a great risk to all leaf-eating insects in the food chain for far longer than the intended purpose.

That risk comes from Dimilin's overall impact on the ecosystem. Because it's such a broad-based pesticide, using Dimilin is a little like using a bazooka to kill a bug. The target will die, but so will a great many other critters in the area.

Dimilin's extreme toxicity for aquatic insects and crustaceans like the well-known and eaten blue-claw crab is one reason it's rated as a "restricted use" chemical by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Some scientists even believe spraying Dimilin may prolong the natural cycle of rising and falling gypsy moth populations, because it also kills the critters that naturally prey on gypsy moth caterpillars. Even if that theory isn't yet proven to everyone's satisfaction, it's difficult to make the case that the short-term reduction of gypsy moths outweighs the longer term dam-



Gypsy moth tent caterpillars on a tree in Brick. (FILE PHOTO)

age done to other areas of highly interdependent local ecosystems.

For all of these reasons, gypsy moth control measures since 1985 have followed an integrated approach that includes use of a biological pesticide (rather than chemical) that isn't toxic

to people or any insects other than butterflies and moths.

The state Department of Environmental Protection made the right call in keeping the ban on aerial spraying of Dimilin in place. This is also an

other example of what concerned citizens can do by raising their voices.

Michele S. Byers is executive director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, Far Hills.