



Cactus Moth Detection and Monitoring Network on Public and Private Lands in the United States. A partnership between USDA-APHIS, USGS, and Mississippi State University
Progress Report March 2009

Webpage: http://www.gri.msstate.edu/cactus_moth

Introduction. Cactus moth (*Cactoblastis cactorum*), one of the most successful biological control agents in history, has been transported around the world in various prickly pear cactus control programs. By 2002, free-living populations of the moth had spread from the Florida Keys to the Florida Panhandle and South Carolina. It now poses a serious threat to native prickly pear cactus populations in the American Southwest, as well as the cactus industry and desert ecosystems in Mexico.

A research, extension, and coordination effort to monitor the spread and develop integrated control of cactus moth has been developed as part of collaborative research between USGS and Mississippi State University, with assistance from USDA-APHIS. This project has the following components: Early Detection and Reporting of Cactus Moth, Distribution of Prickly Pear Cactus, in the Region, Modeling of *Opuntia* Distribution, Cactus and Cactus Moth Extension Information, Web-Based Database of Cactus and Cactus Moth Locations, and Regional Coordination

I. Early Detection and Reporting of Cactus Moth. Task Description: Cactus moth detection techniques will be tested to find an optimal approach for detection, and a network of detection sites at known cactus locations will be implemented. The MSU insect collection will develop instructional information for potential volunteer monitors at the selected monitoring sites, and provide for moth species verification and vouchering.

Summary of Objectives:

1. Develop and test techniques for (a) detecting cactus moth infestations, (b) delimiting infested areas, and (c) determining effectiveness of control actions.
2. Develop a cactus moth detection network in the project area.
3. Develop protocols for monitoring native and ornamental cactus populations.
4. Develop protocols for reporting and verifying suspected cactus moth infestations.

Progress this month:

- Cactus moth data and information supplied to the NBII Butterflies and Moths of North America database.

II. Distribution of Opuntia in the Region.

Task Description: MSU staff, natural resource agency professionals, and volunteers will be used to search for populations of *Opuntia* cactus in the region. Native cactus populations will be located using herbarium records, contact of federal, state, and NGO biologists, and surveys. The location and description of all *Opuntia* cactus populations in the region and of cactus moth monitoring sites will be placed on a web-accessible database, as part of extension efforts listed below.

Summary of Objectives:

1. Develop and test methods to locate and map populations of cactus in support of surveys to detect and delimit cactus moth infestations in the region
2. Utilize professionals and volunteers to survey cactus locations in the Southeastern region.

Progress this month:

- Assisted with cactus moth survey/eradication trip to Petit Bois and Horn Islands in MS with USDA-APHIS and USDA-ARS 31 March 2009.

III. Modeling of Opuntia Distribution in the Region.

Task Description: We will develop spatial models to predict cactus distribution in a GIS framework.

Summary of Objectives:

1. Develop cactus distribution prediction models

Progress this month:

- Applied for observation (NPS) and observation and collection (FL State Parks) permits for ecological field studies.
- Collected additional genetic data for Florida *Cactoblastis cactorum* accessions, expanding upon Simonsen et al. data. The intent is to develop a more refined picture of haplotype distribution in Florida for population modeling studies.
- Met with Mark Woodrey and others at Grand Bay NERR (NOAA) and with Gary Hopkins at GINS (NPS) to begin long-term *Opuntia* and cactus moth monitoring along the Mississippi coast.

IV. Cactus And Cactus Moth Extension Information.

Task Description: We will develop web-based information to aid in the identification of cactus and the cactus moth.

Summary of Objectives:

1. Web-based educational materials on cactus and the cactus moth
2. Educational program on cactus moth, including on-line and printed fact sheets and brochures.

Progress this month:

- No additional tasks

V. Web-based database for cactus and cactus moth distribution.

Task Description: We will develop a web-based avenue for reporting suspected locations on the web, and web GIS database to display the movement of the moth and locations of natural cactus populations. Webpage:

http://www.gri.msstate.edu/cactus_moth

Summary of Tasks:

1. Operational web database for locating and mapping cactus and cactus moth populations.

Progress this month:

- Maintained the cactus moth system and online map

VI. Coordination.

Task Description: A collaborative project of this size involving multiple agencies requires a concerted effort to coordinate activities and agree on the tasks to be done and data to be collected.

Coordination activities this month:

- Victor Maddox assisted USDA APHIS PPQ with a survey and cactus moth eradication trip beginning March 31.

Publications and Presentations

Travis Marsico presented our first complete genetic analyses of *Cactoblastis cactorum* and *Melitara prodenialis* at a USDA-sponsored workshop on Synthesizing Ecology and Evolution for the Study of Invasive Species, in Lake Tahoe on March 19-22. The poster was titled "Genetic Diversity within the Native Ranges of Two Cactophagous Pyralid Moths" and was co-authored with Chris Brooks, Lisa Wallace, Mark Welch, and Gary Ervin.

Undergraduate student, Jeffery Cannon, won second place in a poster competition for his work with *Opuntia*. The poster was titled "Soil texture effects on *Opuntia pusilla* morphology" and was co-authored with Gary Ervin. The poster was presented at the second annual Biology Undergraduate Research Symposium at MSU on March 6th.

Please note that this will be the last monthly update – beginning in April we will be publishing a quarterly newsletter-type update, with the first issue released for April through June 2009.

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