MARYLAND

Md. lawmakers target spotted lanternflies

By Katharine Wilson

As the summer approaches in Maryland, so will the peak stage of the red, white and pesky spotted lanternflies — pushing lawmakers to hit them at their home base: the tree-of-heaven.

Under legislation intended to limit the spread of spotted lanternflies, local governments would be able to prohibit the sale, planting, or growth on a property of tree-of-heavens or other invasive trees. Maryland cities and counties would also be allowed to influence the removal of the tree through financial incentives or programs to replace the trees with native trees.

Both chambers are set to pass the final version of the legislation this week before the 2026 legislative session concludes on April 13. The Maryland House of Delegates passed its version 128-8 in February, and the Senate passed its bill 38-7 in March.

If passed, both measures will be sent to Gov. Wes Moore's desk. The legislation was supported by several environmental groups, the Maryland Association of Counties, and the Maryland Municipal League.

"The local jurisdictions are the ones who really need to get on this, and they're the ones who are really at the front line of ridding us of these invasive pests," said Del. Linda Foley, the lead bill sponsor and a Montgomery County Democrat.

An adult spotted lantern fly is pictured. Maryland is expanding its quarantine zone. ANDY LAVALLEY/POST-TRIBUNE

Still, Del. Robin Grammer, a Republican from Baltimore County who voted against the House version in February, said that he is concerned the bill could allow local governments to become "the tree police."

"I think it's a little bit of an overreach of government to have the state or local government come and tell you that you have to cut your tree down," Grammer said. "They don't frequently think about the long-term implications of what they're voting for, and down the road, when we start to see the state or local government start to come up in people's property and dictate what they can grow, what they have to grow, where they can grow it — this is how that nightmare starts."

Spotted lanternflies, native to East Asia, cause damage to plants by drinking tree sap, often impacting grapes, apples, peaches, and pine trees. The bugs also excrete a sugary substance, called honeydew, that blocks plant photosynthesis and leads to mold.

In Maryland, the pesky bugs were first spotted in 2018 in Cecil County, according to the Maryland Department of Agriculture. They've since spread across 20 Maryland counties and Baltimore City.

The tree-of-heaven, also native to East Asia, first came to the United States in the 1700s, according to the University of Maryland Extension.

"As the preferred host plant for the ubiquitous Spotted Lanternfly, the Tree of Heaven presents a resounding threat to the health of Maryland's ecosystem," Dominic Butchk, the director of intergovernmental relations at the Maryland Association of Counties, wrote in testimony supporting the bill. "While counties respect homeowners' right to transform the landscape of their property within certain limits, it is critical that nonnative plant species be controlled from causing severe unintended consequences."

The Maryland General Assembly in 2024 passed a bill to prohibit the sale of invasive species, including the tree-of-heaven. But it didn't impact tree-of-heaven plants already growing in Maryland. The legislation passed by the General Assembly on Tuesday was based, Foley said, on the approved 2023 legislation that has allowed local government to manage and remove invasive bamboo species.

Have a news tip? Contact Katharine Wilson at kwilson@baltsun.com.