

July 16, 2006

**NEWS RELEASE FROM THE OFFICE OF:**

**DENNIS SMITH  
COUNTY EXTENSION AGENT  
GREGG COUNTY**

Texas has its share of native termites, but Formosan termites have nastier habits, according to entomologists with the [Texas Forest Service](#) and [Texas Cooperative Extension](#). Formosan termites are considered the most aggressive and economically devastating termites in the country, according to Ronald Billings, entomologist with the Texas Forest Service. "In addition to infesting wood in use, these termites may attack and kill living trees, making them of particular concern as an urban forest pest," Billings said. Once they've infested a structure, they are extremely difficult to eradicate.

Formosan termites were identified in the United States shortly after World War II, hitchhiking on timber and wood products aboard military ships coming from the Pacific. Because they are weak fliers, they were slow to spread at first, but lately have been picking up momentum. Formosan termites have recently been located in Gregg County.

The pest is native to Central America and the Far East. Like native termites, they can damage wooden structures. For two reasons, once they have infested a structure they are much harder to effectively treat than native subterranean species.

Where a typical native subterranean termite infestation can consist of a few hundred thousand workers, Formosan colonies have been found that contain 10 million or more. The second reason stems from the Formosan termite being more resourceful than native species. Colonies of most native species of termite need soil contact to obtain moisture and survive. Cut off their access to soil, and the colony can be eventually destroyed.

Formosan termites may invade a wooden structure from the ground in a way similar to native species. Once in the structure, however, they will find a moisture source somewhere.

There have even been reported cases of Formosans making small tunnels through wood to funnel moisture into their colonies.

Formosan termites also build "cartons," large cellulose structures resembling irregularly shaped wasp nests. These nests, which can be perched in trees or under the eaves of houses, can exist without contact with the soil.

In living shade trees, the Formosan termites may hollow out the center of the tree and construct their carton nests in the empty space. Once an aerial nest is produced, the termites can survive for long periods with no further need for soil contact, which makes them more destructive and difficult to detect, according to Billings.

Formosans have been known to attack more than 47 plant species, including citrus, cherry laurel, sweet gum, cedar, willow, wax myrtle, Chinese elm and white oak. Formosan termites feed on both the spring growth and the summer growth wood. Searching for food and moisture, Formosan termites have also been known to chew through non-cellulose material, such as thin sheets of lead or copper, asphalt, plaster, creosote, rubber, and plastic.

Termite-infested landscape timbers, recycled lumber or mulch appears to be the primary means of long-range transport in Texas.

Because they are weak fliers, they depend upon man and commerce to move from one area to another.

Formosan termites can burrow deeply into the timbers and remain hidden from view. Formosan termites also can infest mulch, particularly hardwood mulch. Any mulch or lumber transported in from infested areas, particularly from Gulf Coast counties, should be considered suspect.

The good news is the conventional means of termite prevention barrier treatments using a termiticide applied to the soil around the foundation and/or insecticide-laced food in bait stations will work as well on Formosan as with native species.

Formosan termites are easy to distinguish from other ants and termites. The first sign of an infestation most often is the presence of termite swarms on windowsills or at indoor lights. Unlike native termites, Formosan termites swarm at night, with swarms in Texas occurring between mid-May and mid-June. Shelter tubes made of soil that extend from the soil up the side of the house foundation are a definite and common sign of a subterranean termite infestation.

By breaking open these active tunnels, the homeowner or pest control operator can inspect the workers and soldiers and determine whether the uninvited guests are Formosan or native termites.

A Formosan termite soldier has a tear-dropped or egg-shaped, brown head compared to the more parallel-sided brown head of the native subterranean termite soldier. The workers are

white or cream-colored (both head and body) and are indistinguishable from those of native termites. Images of Formosan termites can be found at <http://termites.tamu.edu>, a Texas A&M University System website dedicated to termites.

A word of caution when breaking open the shelter tubes: Where native termites will not bite humans, Formosan soldiers will.

*Dennis Smith can be contacted at the Gregg County Extension Office by e-mail at [dg-smith@tamu.edu](mailto:dg-smith@tamu.edu) or telephone at: 903-236-8429.*

Extension programs serve people of all ages regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.