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New Cotton Pest Identified In Florida Keys

April 23, 2010

TALLAHASSEE – Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles H. Bronson announced today that the cotton seed bug, *Oxycarenus hyalinipennis* (Costa), has been found on cotton in a residential area of Monroe County by a US Department of Agriculture inspector. In the past, this insect has been intercepted on shipments into Florida, but this is the first time the pest has been found in the Florida environment.

"The cotton seed bug is a serious pest of cotton and we are hopeful it is contained on an island in the Keys far away from the cotton production area," Commissioner Bronson said. "Our inspection teams are currently in the field conducting a delimiting survey that will tell us if this pest has spread," Bronson added.

The cotton seed bug attacks cotton and other plants in the cotton family including hibiscus and okra. It can also feed on other fruits and seeds of unrelated plants causing significant damage. It is native to Africa, but has become established worldwide including in the Caribbean Basin and Puerto Rico. The 4-5 mm (1/4 inch) insect feeds on cottonseed making the seeds less likely to sprout and reduces oil quality. They can also cause staining of the cotton lint during the ginning process. Another unfortunate characteristic of this bug is the foul smell emitted when they congregate on walls when they are not feeding. A USDA report indicates cottonseed weight in Egypt decreased 2.5 – 15 percent due to this pest, creating significant revenue losses. Severe infestations may decrease germination (sprouting of seed) by as much as 75 percent.

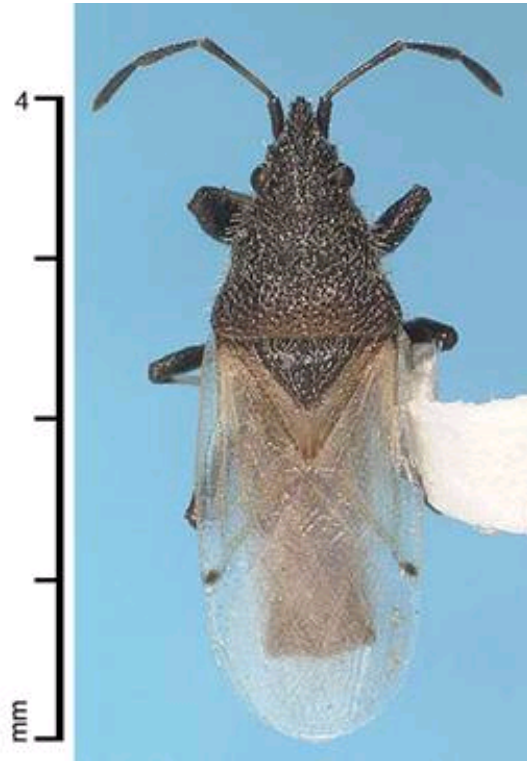
In Florida, the Division of Plant Industry regulates the planting of cotton due to boll weevil, a plant pest of cotton. These regulations prohibit the noncommercial propagation, planting and growing of any species of *Gossypium* (genus of 39-40 species of shrubs in the Malvaceae family, including cotton) in Florida except under FDACS special permit, this includes wild cotton. In addition, wild cotton is listed as an endangered plant in Florida and should not be removed from the wild. In summary, wild cotton growing naturally in the Florida environment is protected and should not be distributed, but the growing or planting of noncommercial cotton is prohibited without a special permit. Agricultural Statistics Services reported that in 2009 Florida produced 78 thousand acres of commercial cotton and 31 thousand tons of seed.

A delimiting survey is underway around the find in Monroe County by the Cooperative Agricultural Pest Survey (CAPS) program. CAPS is a combined effort of state and federal agricultural agencies, which conducts surveillance, detection and monitoring of exotic plant pests of agricultural and natural plant resources. They have been conducting surveys of wild cotton in South Florida and okra fields in Homestead since 2008. During the previous surveys, no cotton seed bug was found. People who think they have found a cotton seed bug are asked to contact the DPI helpline at 888-397-1517. Visit www.fl-dpi.com for more information.

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