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Gypsy moths threaten Mt. Nittany

Mike Joseph and Anne Danahy Centre Daily Times COLLEGE TOWNSHIP

— Gypsy moths will outnumber the dollars available to kill them next year, and a good part of Mount Nittany — the centerpiece of Centre County's tree-lined reputation — could get badly chewed up.

The potential for defoliation by gypsy moth larvae next spring is high, said Ron Woodhead, president of the Mount Nittany Conservancy, a land trust that owns 765 acres on the nose and top of the area's distinctive topographic feature.

Woodhead and others who have hiked the mountainside in recent weeks came back alarmed at the number of gypsy moth egg masses waiting out winter's cold to hatch from mid-April to mid-May.

"There are cases up there where you can't see the bark of the tree because of the egg masses on the tree trunks," Woodhead said Monday. "We know we're going to have a big problem."

The top of Mount Nittany, where the wind blows the insects around, was badly defoliated by gypsy moth caterpillars this year. Trees in Rush, Snow Shoe and Patton townships and other areas were also heavily damaged.

If Mount Nittany faces a second straight year under siege by the voracious pests, Woodhead said, then "those trees are history on the top of the mountain."

The state Bureau of Forestry has \$3 million in state money and \$1 million in federal money for a gypsy moth suppression program that would allow infested areas to be sprayed at a cost to municipalities of \$17 an acre.

But because Mount Nittany is not a residential area, it is a low priority and unlikely to be covered by the state program, said Karl Mierzejewski, Centre County's gypsy moth coordinator.

He agreed that Mount Nittany was

badly defoliated this year and said the sides were marginally defoliated. The shortage of rain after the first defoliation as the trees produced their second flush of leaves stressed the trees more, Mierzejewski said. That stress coupled with another year of gypsy moths could lead to tree mortality.

"There was the first year of major defoliation on top of Mount Nittany this year. Another defoliation would really, really stress the trees," Mierzejewski said. "But right now the Bureau of Forestry is really short of cash."

The conservancy has begun to take steps to spray as much of Mount Nittany as possible.

Ken Reeves, a conservancy director emeritus, asked College Township last week to cover an up-front \$13,000 deposit for the conservancy to meet Wednesday's deadline to try to get in on the state spraying program, which is the least expensive alternative. The conservancy will repay the township.

Reeves told township council that, although 250 egg masses per acre is the minimum to be eligible for state spraying, egg mass counts on Mount Nittany ranged from 3,800 to 38,000 per acre.

"We want to spray the entire mountain if at all possible," Reeves said.

Mierzejewski asked the state to include 16,000 acres of private land in the county in the state spraying.

He said the county should know in about a month which tracts will be included, but he's doubtful that Mount Nittany's forest will be among them.

If Mount Nittany doesn't make the cut in the state's spraying program, it will pin its hopes on being part of a \$34-an-acre program Penn State plans for its core campus, arboretum and other areas.

If both the state-sponsored and Penn State options fall through, Woodhead said, then the conservancy will be "sort of on our own" looking at spraying costs of \$60 per acre, a total expense of \$46,000 and possibly