

London Tree Officers Association – Position statement OPM 2015

Introduction

The LTOA and Tree Officers have been involved with the control / eradication of Oak Processionary Moth (OPM) since it was first identified in London in 2006. In 2010 the LTOA published their Guidance Note on OPM.

The LTOA has worked closely with the Forestry Commission (FC) and its partners, engaged with the Advisory Group and maintained its own OPM Working Party. With the current programme review and the possibility of the ending or downgrading of FC control, the LTOA feels it is time to restate its views on the OPM issue.

The LTOA members who wrote this statement are: Richard Edwards (LB Croydon, LTOA Chair), Craig Ruddick (LB Richmond) and Dave Lofthouse (LB Merton, LTOA Executive Committee member).

The following document contains comment from the 2010 LTOA Guidance Note and from the as yet unpublished 2nd Edition of that Note.

2012 - 2015

During the past three years of the centrally funded control programme the actions of the Forestry Commission and its allies in the programme have without doubt had successes in slowing and controlling the spread of the pest. This is evidenced by the Pangbourne outbreak where the centralised intervention of the FC has arguably brought OPM close to eradication in this area - though relaxation or ending of the programme may prove this conclusion to be wrong.

In the wider context however, the programme has clearly not succeeded in eradication or even preventing the spread of OPM.

Tree or health risks

The 2010 Guidance Note highlights that while there are long term potential risks of damage to trees, the overriding issues are those of public health. There are a number of tree officers who consider that there is a long term threat to tree health – evidenced by data from mainland Europe on tree deaths.

Another major certain risk to trees at this time, is that of unwarranted removals of oak trees owing to the perceived expense of managing or eradicating the pest.

Core and buffer zone Control

LTOA Guidance 2nd Edition, (unpublished), states the following:

The main infestation area of the outbreak in West London has been divided into two zones:

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- *The Core area – the original area of infestation where OPM has been able to survive and is now largely breeding naturally in some areas. It has almost certainly established in this zone – characterised by a dense urban matrix of differing ownerships*
- *The Buffer zone – An area encircling the Core, where the aim has been to hold a perimeter against the outward spread of OPM*

Here is the inherent problem of the Core and Buffer strategy currently still in place. The Core area receives less in resources. There is limited inspection and enforcement of Statutory Plant Health Notices, nor consistent treatment where SPHNs have been served. This problem can only worsen if the Core grows year by year due to any failures in the Buffer, leaving a central area which will always re-infest its surroundings.

Conversely the Buffer is a perpetual 'action zone' while the Core remains a source of re-infestation.

One might liken the situation to walking a tightrope. Eradication is a demand to walk that rope – a hard task but with the end in view. Control and containment is a requirement to balance forever on the rope with no end in sight. Which is the realistic proposition?

A further option– advised against by the LTOA – is to treat OPM like Brown Tail Moth (BTM) on an *ad hoc* basis in areas of high occupancy, educating people to keep away from hairy caterpillars and staying away from OPM nests. This will result from time to time in closures of parks and schools, in steady and increasing expenditure as OPM spreads without major control effort and also increasing tree losses.

Ramifications in possible ending of the FC control programme

The LTOA would wish to understand what might be the effect of ending a centrally funded control programme on imports and related issues. The bulk of the UK is currently a Protected Zone by virtue of having an isolated outbreak area where control is practised and SPHNs are issued to prevent further spread.

Were the buffer perimeter front line and the issuing – or at least the enforcement – of SPHNs, to be relaxed or weakened, what would be the fate of UK protected status?

If that status changed and import controls changed this could be the death knell of any control in the UK.

Research

Government research into OPM must continue to establish behavioural patterns affecting population, spread and the health effects upon host trees.

The efficacy of established and new methods of chemical control must be understood as well as the long term impact that these are having upon non-target species populations and the wider ecology.

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Alternative methods of control need to be researched, such as experimenting with pheromones to confuse males or interfere with sexual reproduction, genetic manipulation and identifying natural predators.

Devolving control to Local Authorities

Currently there is increasing pressure upon budget managers to reduce expenditure and Local Government has, in most cases, little or sporadic capacity to manage OPM effectively. Eradication or even control programmes require that the complexity of the urban mosaic is understood and that treatment is timely across a vast range of ownerships, which presupposes an efficient dedicated enforcement programme as well as possible legislative changes.

Similarly, inspection and search programmes require dedicated teams working full time in various seasons.

Passing the responsibility for the OPM programme to individual underfunded local authorities virtually guarantees uncontrolled spread of this pest.

Threat of oak removal

Individual tree or land owners may see tree removal as a control method locally, simply to rid themselves of the perpetual burden of OPM management, as evidenced within London where trees have been felled for this reason.

The view of the LTOA is that the removal of oak trees due to infestation of OPM is a disproportionate action as other methods of control are available.

We encourage other organisations to endorse this view as such action could have widespread impact upon oak populations within the affected areas, altering the landscape through removal of amenity and heritage trees and biodiversity through the destruction of crucial habitat.

Due to the elements in the life cycle and behaviour of the pest, tree removals are not a control measure for the spread of OPM. A tree can be infested once and 'clean' the next year, whether treatments or nest removal have occurred or not. The prophylaxis of spraying a tree infested in the previous year has a very good chance of eliminating the pest from that tree. Subsequent re-infestation can of course occur if other sources are not attended to. The logical extension of the idea of control by tree removal would require the removal of all oaks.

Lessons learned for future bio-security threats

The Forestry Commission programme can be seen as a practice for future bio-security threats; the main lesson learnt must be that swift and decisive action is required. Many Tree Officers feel that if in 2006, decisive action had been taken - namely the destruction of small numbers of infested trees (as at the Olympic Park) along with chemical spraying with an aggressive, effective pesticide on surrounding host trees - OPM might have been eradicated early on at relatively low cost.

This is not to use the comfortable benefit of hindsight, but was evidenced many years ago with the negative experience of Dutch Elm Disease¹. More recently a positive re-enforcement of this

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message comes from the apparently successful treatment of the Asian Longhorn Beetle outbreak in Kent and of Oriental Chestnut Gall Wasp at St Albans.

Allied lessons are; that the response must be centralised – as, before the centralised treatment programme, recalcitrant tree owners acted only under duress and not in a timely fashion, ruining the united action of responsible owners; and that relaxation in action heralded a need for ever more money and attention in a very short time.

Conclusions

The LTOA Guidance 2010 came to the key conclusions listed below. The LTOA considers that in the main these are still valid, but we add further conclusions from the as yet unpublished 2nd Edition and from the findings of the sub-group.

- The human health problems posed by OPM need to be recognised as a significant effect of this pest and appropriate existing legislation, pertinent to a human health issue, activated in tandem with plant health-based measures.
- Plant health measures must remain in place and if necessary, import controls or their enforcement strengthened to prevent further new outbreaks resulting from the importation of infested tree stock.
- In the eventuality of the plant health-based eradication programme failing or being downgraded to a control/containment strategy, appropriate existing legislation, pertinent to a human health issue, will need to be activated.
- Adequate resources should be made available to give an eradication programme a chance of success. This must recognise the issues of privately owned trees.
- If high costs and collateral environmental damage are to be avoided, urgent action is required on the licensing and availability of the most effective treatments.
- If the above cannot be achieved, the LTOA reluctantly concludes that eradication requires the acceptance of such localised collateral damage.

From the 2nd Edition (unpublished)

- The major funding increase from 2012 to 2015 showed great promise and allowed for the essential concerted and co-ordinated approach to the OPM problem. Nevertheless the relative lack of attention – due to funding limitations – to the Core area is a fatal weakness – compounded by the possible discontinuation of funding now likely.
 - Continued research into the control of OPM
 - SPHN should continue to be enforced to maintain UK protected status.
 - Encourage oak tree owners to keep their oaks for amenity, heritage and bio-diversity as removal is not an effective form of control.
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Caring for the Capital's Trees



- A need to continue a centralised, co-ordinated control programme. Devolving control to numerous Local Authorities and land owners will greatly reduce the effectiveness of control and be less cost-effective.

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ⁱ 'Too little, too late'? Science, policy and Dutch elm disease in the UK
by Isobel Tomlinson and Clive Potter in the Journal of Historical Geography, 2010