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NEWS RELEASE
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Silverfish and Firebrats

A number of calls have been received regarding problems with silverfish and firebrats. Common house-invading pests, they contaminate food with their droppings and scales from their bodies damage paper goods and even stain cloth. Silverfish and firebrats usually invade the home from some outside source. Considerable time is required for populations to become established, grow and reproduce. Once they are controlled, they generally do not re-infest from outdoors.

Silverfish and firebrats are flattened from top to bottom, elongated and oval in shape. They are easy to recognize by their lack of wings, three tail projections and two long antennae. Their bodies are covered with fine scales which are silvery to brown in color.

Silverfish develop from egg to young to adult and continue to molt throughout their adult life. They are long-lived, surviving from two to eight years.

The silverfish is probably the most important species. The female lays eggs continuously after she reaches adulthood and may lay over 100 eggs during her lifespan. The eggs are deposited singly or in small groups in cracks and crevices and hatch in 3 to 6 weeks. The young are approximately 1/20 of an inch in length. They are white but take on the adult's silver coloring within 4 to 6 weeks. Adults reach a length of about 3/4 of an inch. Silverfish like moisture and require a high relative humidity (75 to 95 percent). They also have a temperature preference between 70 degrees and 80 degrees F. This is why dark closets near water heaters and bathrooms, garage areas, and sheds are popular areas for them to hide and multiply. They are attracted to old books and papers.

The firebrat, is quite similar to the silverfish, but is darker. The firebrat prefers temperatures over 90 degrees F. It also enjoys high relative humidity, somewhere around 70 to 80 percent. Because of their high temperature preference, firebrats are commonly found near heating pipes, fireplaces, ovens and other heat sources.

Silverfish and firebrats are fast running and are most active at night. They generally prefer the lower levels in homes, but are often found in attics as well. They can go for long periods of time, sometimes over a year, without food. They prefer carbohydrates and protein food such as flour, dried
meat, rolled oats, paper and even glue. Because they can survive so long without food, sanitation is of little help in eliminating an infestation. Silverfish are primarily an indoor problem. They usually are brought into the home in foodstuffs or other items such as furniture, old books and papers.

Sanitation only helps prevent a re-infestation after a population has been eliminated. It alone cannot control silverfish or firebrats and is only slightly effective in reducing their numbers.

A reduction in available water or relative humidity is helpful in eliminating silverfish and firebrats. Dry out or ventilate shelter areas to reduce their moisture level. Since these insects prefer darkness, lighting a sheltered area sometimes forces them to migrate to sites where they cannot survive or where they can be controlled easier.

Apply insecticide sprays to sheltered areas, cracks, crevices, around floor moldings, in and behind furniture and in attics. Occasionally, large populations become established in wall voids. It may be necessary to drill small holes in the walls in order to treat inside them.

Spraying outdoors is not particularly helpful, but may help to reduce an occasional re-infestation. Use insecticide products containing, bendiocarb, boric acid, diazinon, malathion, pyrethrins or resmethrin. Dust and aerosol formulations of some of these products are useful in treating attics, wall voids and other hard-to-reach areas that are not subject to wetting or high humidity.

See Extension publication B-1373 House and Landscape Pests for more information on pest control and pesticide products. It is advisable to use the services of a pest control operator when the infestations are large, persistent and hard to find. A commercial operator has the knowledge, training and equipment to perform safe and effective control.

Insecticide label clearances are subject to change and changes may have occurred recently. The pesticide USER is responsible for the effects of pesticide residues on plants or household goods, as well as problems that could arise from contamination of neighboring properties or plants. Always read and follow carefully the instructions on the container label. For more information, contact the County Extension Office at 968-5831.

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