



The Star-Ledger

Experts mount all-out fight to not let the bedbugs bite

As EPA summit seeks solutions, N.J. firm calls out the dogs

Thursday, April 16, 2009

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The bedbug -- a minuscule, multiple-legged, blood-sucking pest -- is clawing its way back into the American consciousness.

A resurgence of the pesticide-resistant bugs -- believed to have been largely eradicated after World War II -- prompted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to convene the first-ever National Bed Bug Summit this week in Arlington, Va., as a way for experts and politicians to discuss the implications and find a solution for this "modern scourge."

Unlike mosquitoes, bedbugs -- technically called *Cimex lectularius* -- don't carry disease but were classified in 2002 by the EPA as a public health pest. Their bites leave small, itchy red bumps on the skin.

The bugs have a financial impact as well, as their population has multiplied in recent years from apartments in New Jersey to posh hotels in London, mainly the result of a globe-trotting public.

"One man sat behind me and whispered to me he had a 300-unit building," said Assemblywoman Joan Quigley (D-Hudson), a summit attendee. "He has already spent more than \$100,000 to try to eradicate the bedbugs. Landlords can't afford to spend this kind of money.

"I came home more frightened than I was when I went" to the summit, said Quigley, who has introduced legislation in Trenton that would require landlords to pay for quick eradication of bedbug infestation.

Bedbugs don't fly. They rely on people and items, from books to cell phones to purses, to hitch a ride. Most of the invaders are so tiny -- barely big enough to cover Lincoln's beard on the head of a penny -- they're difficult to detect.

Bedbugs have been showing up in nearly every setting, from limousines and hotels, large corporations and small businesses, to private homes and the largest apartment complexes, experts said.

Richard Pollack, an entomologist at the Harvard School of Public Health, said there's no way to put a number on the bedbug population explosion but that it is likely to get worse before it gets better. Many are stowaways on international travelers, he said.

"Apartment house to apartment house, house to house, community to community, we bring home more than fond memories of our vacations and business trips. ... They spread far and wide," Pollack said.

Orlando Burgos knows about the situation firsthand.

Sitting in his Newark apartment yesterday, Burgos pointed to bites on his hands and a small sore on his Chihuahua, fearing that it, too, was bitten by bedbugs that have infested his apartment in a Newark Housing

Authority senior citizen building.

"It's horrible. You know how these things live? They suck your blood," said Burgos, a 63-year-old retired social worker who discarded his mattress and now sleeps in a sleeping bag on the floor.

"Look at how I'm living," he said, pointing to his belongings, bagged and stored on his apartment's terrace. "You've got to wash everything, your bedspreads, your curtains, send your clothes to the cleaners, and put everything into bags."

Tory Gunsolley, chief administrative officer at the Newark Housing Authority, said the agency launched an "aggressive bedbug eradication program" a year ago, after the insects resurfaced.

"It's unfortunate that they've come back, but they've come back, and they're everywhere," Gunsolley said.

Bedbugs have been a boon for Bell Environmental Services of Parsippany. The family-run pest-control outfit didn't often deal with the pest three years ago. Today, it takes about 50 calls a day, largely from apartment dwellers who might opt to spend \$400 to \$500 a room to eradicate the pests.

The company uses a liquid carbon dioxide that freezes the bedbugs and is said to be 98 percent effective. Last August, the company brought in a bedbug-sniffing team of Roscoe, a beagle, and Simon, a mixed breed -- both trained at the Florida Canine Academy, said Jennifer Erdogan, manager of the company's bedbug division. The dogs are an effective ways to find the bugs, she said.

The resurgence of the bugs has, in fact, created a cottage industry of bedbug remedies. There's PackTite, advertised at \$295, with a patent-pending heating technology that promises to heat luggage just enough to kill the pests, and Protect-A-Bed, with the AllerZip bedding encasement.

The small size of the creatures can be problematic in itself. "I've even seen them inside a screw hole," Erdogan said. "They get behind outlet covers, mirrors, everything. They're pretty tricky."

Just identifying the pest can be tricky, said Harvard's Pollack, who has examined thousands of specimens sent in by a worrisome public. Some of the specimens, he said, have even turned out to be cookie crumbs.

"Just because you find an insect on a bed and mattress doesn't mean it's a bedbug" Pollack said.

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