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Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe Fights Emerald Ash Borer Threat to Protect Culture and Nature

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In 2016, the invasive, tree-killing emerald ash borer (EAB) was found in Akwesasne, an area of about 15,570 acres in northern New York state. Forested or undeveloped habitat makes up the vast majority of Akwesasne. The EAB is a destructive wood-boring pest, which infests all species of ash trees in North America. According to

Jessica Raspitha, Land Resources Program Manager for the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe's Environment Division, "The Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe is facing a significant threat to its cultural practices and ecological health due to the spread of the EAB in Akwesasne and in cultural-use areas in nearby state forests."

The EAB infestation poses a serious risk to ash trees, especially black ash, which is culturally significant for traditional Mohawk basketry. Land Resources Technician for the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe's Environment Division, Angello Johnson, estimates that "ash trees make up about 20 percent of our forests around this area, and that could be gone within five to 10 years with the impacts of the emerald ash borer." The loss of ash trees could lead to changes to the hydrological regime, forest structure, and species composition in the region. Additionally, dead limbs and damaged trees resulting from EAB infestation may fall at any time, thus posing a threat to public safety. Loss of this important species may also contribute to shoreline disruptions and a loss of cultural practices and identity. **EAB damage.** EAB kills ash trees by boring through the vascular tissue under the bark, effectively cutting off water and nutrient transfer through the tree. (Photo by Angello Johnson)



EAB damage. EAB kills ash trees by boring through the vascular tissue under the bark, effectively cutting off water and nutrient transfer through the tree. (Photo by Angello Johnson)

Since 2020, the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe has applied for and received Plant Protection Act Section 7721 (PPA 7721) funding to protect ash trees through EAB

mitigation efforts. Under the authority of PPA 7721, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) provides funding through [the Plant Pest and Disease Management and Disaster Prevention Program](#) to support projects that strengthen and safeguard agricultural infrastructure. The Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe's EAB mitigation efforts "involve a three-pronged approach that includes 1) trunk injections using a pesticide, 2) biocontrol releases of parasitoid wasps[leveraging the pest's natural predator for its management], and 3) silvicultural treatments to try to improve the habitat of the ash stands," explained Raspitha. Ash management includes thinning out the competition and cutting away trees to improve the health of the stand overall. Johnson expressed, "it's really rewarding to be out there improving these stands, making sure the spacings right and there's enough light coming through the canopy to get to the saplings and seedlings underneath." The collection of ash seeds is also an essential activity that ensures ash trees remain an available resource in the future, whereupon the seeds are shared with intertribal collaborators who are also invested in ash preservation.

Black ash isn't just significant to the Mohawks, it's a culturally important resource utilized by Mohawks and other Northeast Tribes in traditional basket weaving. To safeguard ash, the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe partners with other Tribes in the northeast and with state and federal agencies such as APHIS, USDA's Forest Service, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. "One of the things that I think are particularly rewarding about this type of work is how collaborative it's been," stated Raspitha. "It's a very large issue and it's required a very large solution that's required a lot of interagency collaboration and partnership, and it's just been very valuable to have that and to have the support we've gotten from the other agencies and the other nations."

Through the Plant Pest and Disease Management and Disaster Prevention Program, APHIS provides funding to support projects that expand or enhance pest survey, identification, inspection, mitigation, risk analysis, and public education and outreach. Scan the QR code to learn more about ways to protect Tribal lands from invasive pests and upcoming funding opportunities. For more information on the emerald ash borer program and APHIS' efforts to protect American ash, go to www.aphis.usda.gov and search 'emerald ash borer'. Contact APHIS' Office of the National Tribal Liaison at 301-440-4388 for information on USDA programs and services available to Tribal communities. Visit www.aphis.usda.gov/careers for career and student opportunities.