



For Immediate Release

NAAA Contact: Lindsay Barber, CMP

Phone: (202) 546-5722

Lbarber@agaviation.org

Agricultural Aviation Protects Maine's Forests from Devastating Insect Pest

ALEXANDRIA, VA – April 7, 2026 – Maine's forests are under attack from the spruce budworm (SBW), which defoliates fir and spruce trees, causing their deaths. But JBI Helicopter Services, an agricultural aviation company based in Pembroke, New Hampshire, is leading the fight against this pest. They've been working with the Maine Budworm Response Coalition (MBRC) for the past several years to combat outbreaks of SBW.

SBW is a native moth that is harmful during its larval stage. SBW is normally present in Maine's forests, but roughly every 40 years, the population surges to a level that causes extensive damage and high mortality. The last massive outbreak of SBW in Maine occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, when almost seven million acres of spruce and fir were eliminated. The devastation impacted the local forest-based economy, diminished water quality, altered wildlife habitat, and reduced Maine's air quality.

SBW also increases the risk of widespread forest fires and significantly impacts Canadian wildfires. The widespread tree mortality caused by SBW creates vast amounts of fuel that increases the severity and probability of wildfires. Smoke from the fires has triggered air quality alerts in Canada and the U.S.

Monitoring by the Spruce Budworm Task Force (SBWTF) — a consortium of organizations in Maine concerned with the health of the state's forests — indicated that in 2023, the SBW population was once again increasing in northern Maine and another outbreak was coming. This led to the creation of the MBRC, which began implementing an early intervention strategy to reduce localized SBW populations and prevent another outbreak. If nothing is done to prevent the next outbreak, the negative economic impact is predicted to be \$800 million. The early intervention strategy employed by MBRC relies on aerial applications to spruce and fir forests where SBW populations are high.

Leading the control efforts, JBI Helicopter Services treated 243,000 acres of Maine's forests in 2025. To help, they brought in aircraft from Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Indiana. Eight airplanes treated 199,300 acres, and three helicopters treated the remaining 43,700 acres. JBI applies two different low-toxicity insecticides to control SBW. One is *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt), a naturally occurring soil bacteria used as a biological pesticide to control insect larvae. The other is tebufenozide, which causes SBW caterpillars to molt prematurely, killing them. It works only on moth and butterfly larvae, making it incredibly safe to use. The intervention strategy involves public outreach and notifications to keep everyone informed, with almost 50 different stakeholder groups receiving notifications about MBRC monitoring and application activities.



JBI Helicopter Services is getting ready for more aerial applications to treat SBW hot spots in 2026, with plans to treat 60,000 acres. They will continue to be the application arm of the MBRC until this devastating insect pest is under control and an outbreak is no longer likely. Agricultural aviation is a 104-year-old industry that utilizes GPS, precision application technologies, and accurate pesticide mixing systems to ensure all aerial applications are effective and safe to both the public and the environment. The industry treats an estimated 5.1 million acres of forest land annually.

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The National Agricultural Aviation Association (NAAA) represents the interests of the small businesses in the U.S., whose owners and pilots are licensed as professional commercial aerial applicators that use aircraft to enhance food, fiber, and bioenergy production, protect forestry and control health-threatening pests. For more information, please visit AgAviation.org.