



Christmas Comes in September for Inspector “Elves”

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MADISON – The elves at the North Pole get all the glory, but some of Santa’s lesser known elves work here in Wisconsin to make sure that Christmas trees find homes in other states and even Canada.

Every September and October, nursery inspectors from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection strap on their elf shoes, so to speak, and head out to inspect Christmas tree fields – 667 of them, on 280 farms, this year. Sometimes other staff members get drafted, too, in the push to get the job done in a narrow window of time.

They’re mostly looking for gypsy moth egg masses that could be hitchhiking on the trees, waiting to hatch come spring and infest a new place. Gypsy moths lay their eggs in August, and growers need to start cutting and shipping in October.

Much of Wisconsin is under quarantine for gypsy moth, including five of the state’s six major Christmas tree counties: Jackson, Langlade, Lincoln, Price and Waushara. Taylor County is the sixth major Christmas tree producer. The quarantine means that growers need certification that their trees are not carrying gypsy moths, and inspection is the way they get that certification. Authorities in their destination states may ask to see the paperwork.

The inspectors gather early in the morning to get their assignments, and then start driving country roads. Some of the farms are large acreages, easy to find. But many of the fields are small, tucked back away from roads in small spaces that won’t accommodate other crops. Once they find the fields, the inspectors walk them, bending to look under and between Christmas tree branches. Then they walk the edge of the field, necks craned, checking deciduous trees that might harbor clumps of gypsy moth eggs, indicating more might be hiding in the Christmas trees. If they spot any egg masses, Christmas trees in the area cannot be shipped to or through non-quarantined states or Wisconsin counties.

Brooke Sanneh oversees Christmas tree inspections for the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. She notes that the inspectors also search for other pests and diseases as a service to growers, who pay up to \$900 a year for their licenses, depending on their sales. Growers with sales under \$250 a year do not need a license.

About 400 Wisconsin Christmas tree farms sell enough trees to need a license, but there are actually about 870 Christmas tree farms in the state, covering about 23,650 acres. Wisconsin is the nation’s sixth largest Christmas tree producer, with more than 600,000 trees cut each year, worth \$12.5 million.

Sanneh says growers shipping trees to non-quarantined areas get first priority for inspections, but other growers still need periodic inspections to maintain their licenses. Those are often the choose-and-cut farms. And at this time of year, inspectors are checking Christmas tree lots to be sure their trees come from licensed growers.

Most of the inspectors will tell you that autumn Christmas tree duty is pretty sweet, despite the long hours and stiff necks. It’s a beautiful time of year, they’re far from noise and crowds, they come face to face with all kinds of wildlife, and they deal with good people.

“They’re family-owned and family-oriented businesses, very friendly,” Sanneh says.

But, she concedes, sometimes Christmas gets just a little old by December after she’s been immersed in it since September. Does she look at her own Christmas tree differently than before she did this work?

“It’s like anything. Ever since I started this job, I’m much more particular about any plants that I buy.”

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