

Manitoba MP seeks Ottawa's lead in eradicating pervasive pests

By Mia Rabson

OTTAWA — Manitoba MP Pat Martin is asking Ottawa to step in and lead a national effort to wipe out bedbugs.

Although nearly eradicated in North America 50 years ago, the growth of international travel and overuse of pesticides have given the pests a new lease on life. They have infested luxury hotels and shut down swanky clothing shops across the United States and are now infesting most major cities in Canada.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control is helping head an American assault on the bugs, working with state and local lawmakers and health experts to source the problem and develop the best ways to beat them back.

Martin wants Ottawa to follow suit with a national strategy in Canada.

"This is an infestation that affects everybody," the Winnipeg Centre MP said. "It is driving people around the bend."

Martin said he has been inundated with heartbreaking letters from con-

stituents overrun by the pests and he believes this problem demands national attention. Both individuals and industries such as tourism will suffer if Canada doesn't act, said Martin.

The NDP MP has a motion before Parliament calling on the government to undertake a comprehensive study of the problem and develop proposals to eradicate bedbugs. In early December, he wrote to Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq asking her to host a meeting of provincial health authorities to get a picture of the problem across the country and help develop recommendations so Canadians know how to deal with it.

He didn't receive a response from Aglukkaq until Tuesday, after her office was contacted about the issue by the *Free Press*.

Aglukkaq's spokesman said Health Canada, in 2008, created a working group with pest control companies, public health agencies and others to expedite the applications for new pesticides that could help control bedbugs. Provinces are not waiting for Ottawa to take the reins on this, however. Ontario announced a \$5-million

strategy Monday to tackle bedbugs, including a public awareness campaign and guide to help Ontarians, and funding for public health agencies in the province to combat bedbugs.

Manitoba is expected to follow with a similar program sometime this year, a provincial spokesman said Tuesday. Anna Pauls, 22, wrote to Martin, her MLA and city councillor in a fit of frustration in November, begging them for help.

"The feeling of hopelessness is overwhelming. The emotional and financial cost of this is staggering," she wrote.

Pauls and her husband began noticing bedbug bites less than two weeks after moving into their West Broadway apartment in October. Their unit has been sprayed three times since but the bugs keep coming back. She says "pretty much every morning" she and her husband wake up with new bites. They do laundry all the time to keep the bugs to a minimum and have had to buy a new mattress after their old one became infested.

Pauls said her landlord and the exterminator blame a stubborn tenant

who refuses to let his apartment be sprayed for the bugs. There is nothing in the Residential Tenancies Act that allows the landlord to force the issue or evict the tenant for refusing.

"We don't have any rights," said Pauls. "We can't break our lease. We could try and sublet but that just seems kind of mean."

Besides, said Pauls, it seems every apartment building in downtown Winnipeg has bedbugs so moving won't solve the problem.

Clint Rosevear, co-owner of Monarch Pest Control in Winnipeg, said he began noticing an increase in calls about bedbugs about four years ago and it just keeps getting worse. His company now fields several calls a day from across the city in every income group.

Hotels, movie theatres and restaurants have all been clients.

"Bedbugs have no preference for wealth or impoverished," said Rosevear.

— with files from Bruce Owen

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