

Potential Threat to U.S. Prickly Pears

Cactoblastis cactorum is a phycitine moth that has been used with remarkable success as a biological control agent against prickly pear cacti, *Opuntia* spp., in Australia, the Caribbean, Hawaii, India, and South America. Solid stands of prickly pears have been reduced to a few stragglers in all these areas within a very short time. The moth whose larvae feed within the cladode (pad) often is cited as one of the best examples of effective biological control.

The moth was introduced to the Caribbean in 1957 to control the prickly pear on Nevis. Later it was taken to other islands but also dispersed naturally to areas such as Puerto Rico. Recently it was found in the Florida Keys and since has spread as far north as Key Biscayne.

There are many species of *Opuntia* in North America, where they form an important element of the flora of certain ecosystems, e.g., deserts. Some of these species now are quite rare. They already

are attacked by native phytophagous insects. The introduction of *Cactoblastis*, however, is a very serious threat to the genus. Pesticides are only effective during the period when the larvae are penetrating the pads. Thereafter they are generally protected by the thick outer cuticle of the pad. A number of natural enemies of *Cactoblastis* are known, but their efficacy and host specificity need evaluation. It is unlikely that such a study will occur unless considerable pressure is brought to bear on state and federal agencies.

More detailed information on the insect and the problem can be had from Drs. D.H. Habeck and F.D. Bennett, Dept. of Entomology and Nematology, IFAS, Univ. of Florida, Gainesville 32511. Ask for Entomology Circular 333 – *Cactoblastis cactorum* Berg (Lepidoptera: Pyralidae), a Phycitine New to Florida.

Clifford Smith and Donald Gardner
NPS/CPSU, University of Hawaii