



Issue: Including Bed Bugs in the Legal Definition of “Vermin or “Pest”

Background: In the summer of 2010, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a joint statement on bed bug control in the United States.

This important document, which can be accessed at http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/publications/bed_bugs_cdc-epa_statement.htm, details the impact of bed bugs on public health.

Specifically, the document states that, “Although bed bugs are not known to transmit disease, they are a pest of significant public health importance.” The statement goes on to say “Bed bugs cause a variety of negative physical health, mental health and economic consequences. Many people have mild to severe allergic reaction to the bites with effects ranging from no reaction to a small bite mark to, in rare cases, anaphylaxis (severe, whole-body reaction) These bites can also lead to secondary infections of the skin such as impetigo, ecthyma, and lymphangitis. Bed bugs may also affect the mental health of people living in infested homes. Reported effects include anxiety, insomnia and systemic reactions.”

Additionally, CDC and EPA stress the critical role health departments play in protecting the public from bed bugs and that they must be involved in efforts to control and manage the blood sucking pest.

Position: Unfortunately, some local and state governments, in ignoring both the pleas of suffering residents and the position of CDC and EPA, still view bed bugs as a “nuisance” pest. Other jurisdictions’ legal definitions of the terms “vermin” or “pest” do not include bed bugs and they therefore lack the authority to compel treatment of such infestations in public housing or accommodations. Following the lead of the EPA and CDC, local and state governments should recognize bed bugs as a pest of significant public health importance, and seek the authority to compel treatment of unchecked infestations.

Where necessary for a health department to require treatment of an unchecked bed bug infestation – just as if a restaurant was overrun with rodents -, NPMA strongly supports and encourages efforts to add bed bugs to a jurisdiction or health code’s legal definition of the term “vermin” or “pest,” whichever is appropriate.