

BUG OFF!

When you think of the West Virginia Department of Agriculture, chickens, cattle, and crops come to mind. Bedbugs...not so much. However, pest control falls under the department's purview in the regulatory division.

For the second time in just three years, a WVDA pesticide regulatory officer received the Region III EPA Outstanding Investigation of the Year award. Paul Bennet was honored at the Region III EPA conference in Ocean City, Maryland for a case involving pest control. Bennett, who's been with the department since graduating from WVU 11 years ago, prides himself on the work he does.

"We don't get rich at what we do. It's about helping the people of West Virginia."

Bennett, who works out of Parkersburg, is a field inspector. "I jokingly call it 'going on patrol.' When we see a pest company, we follow them to their next stop. We observe their application, go over what they did right, what they did wrong, and see if they need some hands-on training," says Bennett. "We also follow up on any pesticide complaints that come into the WVDA."

From inspecting chemical plants like DuPont and PPG to checking out schools, daycare centers, and golf courses, Bennett and his fellow pesticide regulatory officers cover a lot of ground.

The case that won him the 2015 EPA award was one of his toughest. "On a scale of 1-10, this was a 15. It was weeks and weeks and weeks of work. It involved myself and my supervisor, Chad Carpenter. It was a nightmare!"

Bennett got a call last year to take a look at an apartment in a complex in Parkersburg. A woman and her autistic daughter were having big problems with bed bugs and pest control.

"She moved in and within the first week had noticed bed bugs. She immediately contacted her landlord. He sent a maintenance man in to spray for bed bugs, which is not the correct way to handle it," stressed Bennett.

The landlord eventually called in a pest control company. When Bennett inspected the apartment, it was covered from floor to ceiling in a powdery chemical dust. The bed bug spray coated the family's furniture, clothing, kitchenware, and toys, making it unlivable.

The daughter, who was hyper-sensitive to the chemical, had an adverse reaction. The landlord threatened to throw the family out of the apartment when the woman didn't pay rent.

Bennett tracked down previous employees of the apartment complex, one as far away as Florida. After interviewing multiple people and conducting site inspections, he determined the company had a history of improperly spraying pesticides. The case is now in civil litigation.

"When you're able to help somebody, especially in this sort of situation, that's what the job is all about."

Bennett received the 2012 Outstanding Investigation of the Year for his work on a case involving the Wood County school system. A local pest control vendor supposedly found termites throughout several different schools and treated them. The bill to the school system totaled \$18,000. Bennett's investigation found evidence there were no termites to begin with and the pest control vendor never sprayed for any termites.

Agriculture Commissioner Walt Helmick praised Bennett for his exceptional work. "Pesticide regulatory officers are some of the department's unsung heroes. We don't usually hear about the work they do or the lives they impact. They provide safe living and working conditions for the people of West Virginia. Paul Bennett is a wonderful example of that. We're very lucky to have someone of his talent and tenacity working for the WVDA."

As for his next tough investigation, Bennett said he never knows when it will pop up. "It's always something different every day. You don't know when you show up for work what's on your plate for that day."