ISRAEL JOURNAL OF ENTOMOLOGY, Vol. 55, pp. 1–12 (26 January 2026)

POLICY PAPER

The governance of urban pest management in Israel
ניהול של מערך הדברת המזיקים העירוניים בישראל
حوكمة إدارة مكافحة الآفات الحضرية في إسرائيل

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ABSTRACT

Invasive and sanitary pests such as fire ants, Formosan subterranean termites and virus-carrying mosquitoes pose increasing economic and health hazards in urban environments in Israel. Licensed urban pest management specialists are the country's first line of defense, and this article aims to delineate historical and current trends in their numbers and training. In 2016, following a tragedy due to pesticide misuse, licensing of new specialists was improved by adoption of a new law in 2020, which introduced new regulations. Drawing on government reports, data accepted directly from the governmental sources and Ministry of Environmental Protection newsletters (2016–2025), I have tracked the size of the certified workforce and placed the primary emphasis on the pass rates of licensing examinations rather than on training programs, since the law passed and the regulation came into effect. Despite rapid population growth, urban expansion and rising pest pressure, the number of licensed urban pest management specialists has stalled or declined, and their pass rates are inconsistent with increasing demands. This mismatch between the ecological rationale, public health needs and professional capacity is complicated by fragmented, often contradictory, information regarding the available workforce. This report underscores the urgency of strengthening of the training, licensing and oversight systems to sustain Israel's ability to respond effectively to pest outbreaks and pest-borne hazards.

KEYWORDS: Invasive pests, pest control, professional licensing, public health, urban pest management, workforce trends.

תקציר

התפשטות מזיקים תברואתיים פולשים, כגון נמלת האש הקטנה, הטרמיט הפורמוזי ויתושים מעבירי מחלות, מהווה איום כלכלי ותברואתי באזורים העירוניים של ישראל. על רקע זה, תפקידם של המדבירים (בקרי מזיקים) חיוני להגנת בריאות הציבור, שמירה על תשתיות והיערכות למצבי חירום. בעשור האחרון, בעקבות האסון הנגרם על ידי שימוש מוטעה בחומרי הדברה, חל שיפור מהותי בתהליכי הבקרה על המדבירים, ובמיוחד החוק להסדרת העיסוק בהדברת מזיקים עירוניים (2016) ותקנות ההכשרה (2020), אשר הגדירו מחדש את תהליך ההכשרה, הרישוי והפיקוח על העוסקים בתחום. בהסתמך על דוחות ממשלתיים, פרסומים באגרות מידע של המשרד להגנת הסביבה בשנים 2016–2025 והמידע שהתקבל ישירות ממשרדי הממשלה, במטרה לבחון את מספר המדבירים הקיימים, שיעור מעבר הבחינות ומספר המדבירים החדשים. הממצאים מצביעים על ירידה או קיפאון במספר המדבירים המוסמכים, על אף העלייה בצרכים התברואתיים ובהיקף האיומים מאת מזיקים פולשים. בנוסף, קיימת אי הלימה בין נתונים רשמיים לבין נתוני חופש המידע, לצד מחסור בדיווח שיטתי על היקפי הכשרה, נשירה ורישוי מעשי. ממצאים אלו מעידים על פערים משמעותיים בניטור, בתכנון כוח אדם ובהערכת הצרכים הלאומיים בתחום המזיקים העירוניים. המחקר מדגיש את הצורך

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18365577; ISSN (online) 2224-6304
Received: 8 October 2025 / Revised: 2 December 2025 / Accepted: 13 December 2025
urn:lsid:zoobank.org:pub:8629D1E5-6CD3-4478-8576-96330E7F2C33

הדחוף בשיפור השקיפות, איסוף הנתונים, שיתוף הפעולה עם גורמי השטח והערכה מחודשת של הכשרת כוח האדם, כדי להבטיח מענה מקצועי, יעיל ועמיד לאיומי המזיקים בישראל.

מילות מפתח: הדברה, בקרה, מזיקים, רישוי מדבירים, בריאות הציבור, מינים פולשים, מגמות בכח אדם.

الملخص

يشكّل انتشار الآفات الصحية الغازية، مثل النمل الناري، والنمل الأبيض الجوفي الفورموزي، والبعوض الناقل للأمراض، تهديداً اقتصادياً وصحياً في المناطق الحضرية في إسرائيل. و يُعدّ دور مختصي مكافحة الآفات ضرورياً لحماية الصحة العامة، الحفاظ على البنى التحتية، والاستعداد لحالات الطوارئ. خلال العقد الأخير، وبعد كارثة نجمت عن الاستخدام الخاطئ لمواد مكافحة الآفات، طرأ تحسّن جوهري على إجراءات الرقابة على العاملين في هذا المجال، ولا سيما عبر قانون تنظيم مزاولة مهنة مكافحة الآفات الحضرية (٢٠١٦) ولوائح التدريب (٢٠٢٠)، التي اعادة تعريف منظومة التدريب, الترخيص والإشراف على المشتغلين بالمهنة. وبالاستناد الى التقارير الحكومية، ومنشورات وزارة حماية البيئة خلال الأعوام ٢٠١٦–٢٠٢٥، إضافةً إلى معلومات تم الحصول عليها مباشرة من الوزارات الحكومية، تم تتبع عدد مختصي مكافحة الآفات القائمين، نِسَب اجتياز الامتحانات، وعدد المختصين الجدد. تشير النتائج إلى انخفاض أو جمود في عدد المختصين المعتمدين، رغم الزيادة في الاحتياجات الصحية واتساع نطاق التهديدات الناجمة عن الآفات الغازية. كما تظهر فجوة بين البيانات الرسمية وبيانات قانون حرية المعلومات، إلى جانب نقص في الإبلاغ المنهجي عن أحجام التدريب، معدلات التسرب، والترخيص الفعلي للممارسة. تشير هذه النتائج الى وجود ثغرات كبيرة في الرصد ، تخطيط القوى العاملة، وتقييم الاحتياجات الوطنية في مجال الآفات الحضرية. هذه الدراسة تؤكد على الحاجة الملحّة إلى تحسين الشفافية، تعزيز جمع البيانات، وتطوير التعاون مع الجهات الميدانية، وإعادة تقييم تدريب القوى العاملة، لضمان استجابة مهنية وفعّالة وقادرة على الصمود أمام تهديدات الآفات في إسرائيل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مكافحة الآفات، الرقابة، الآفات، ترخيص مختصي مكافحة الآفات، الصحة العامة، الأنواع الغازية، اتجاهات القوى العاملة.

BACKGROUND

> "As of August 2021, there are tens to hundreds of invasive species among them the little fire ant and the Formosan termite; the cost of damage by invasive species is estimated at between 473 million and 1.5 billion shekels a year."

Thus opens the State Comptroller Report (State Comptroller 2022) on *Prevention of Damage by Invasive Species and Biodiversity Conservation*. Invasive species may include any type of living organism—plants, fungi, insects, vertebrates, invertebrates, bacteria, as well as seeds and reproductive units—that are not native to the ecosystem. However, according to the *First Supplement to the Law for the Regulation of the Practice of Urban Pest Management* (MEP 2016), only a small subset of these invasive species—specifically the little fire ant (*Wasmannia auropunctata* (Roger, 1863)) and the Formosan termite (*Coptotermes formosanus* Shiraki, 1909)—are classified as urban sanitary pests. Although numerically fewer, these species make a substantial economic impact. Annual treatment costs for the Formosan termite in the United States have been estimated at approximately 1 billion USD, with the city of New Orleans alone incurring around 300 million USD a year (Lax & Osbrink 2003). In addition, the Ministry of Environmental Protection has estimated that, under a full-spread scenario, the economic damage caused by the little fire ant in Israel could reach approximately 1.22 billion shekels a year.

Among the bodies tasked with confronting this issue is the Pests and Urban Pest Management Department in the Ministry of Environmental Protection, which is in

charge of dealing with disease-bearing sanitary pests, as derived from the Public Health Ordinance (1940) that focused on issues of diseases and sanitation. Additionally, the Department is responsible for implementing the *Law for the Regulation of the Practice of Pest Control* (MEP 2016) and guidelines derived from it, including approval and regulation of pesticides and licensed specialists. It also oversees local authorities (municipalities) on matters of urban pest management and sanitary hazards (MEP 2024).

One of the ways of combatting these pests is through field personnel: 'exterminators' (licensed urban pest management specialists, מדבירים [sing. מדביר]), a term I suggest be changed to 'pest control specialists' (בקרי מזיקים). This proposition was put forward at various times by professionals, to promote the understanding that their activities are not restricted to spraying pesticides, but forms a part of integrated pest management. Licensed urban pest management specialists have great importance in preventing the spread of pests, protecting public health and infrastructure, and alleviation of economic damage. These activities include

- Prevention of the spread of diseases via vector control (WHO 2024), such as mitigating mosquito-borne illnesses (Mirzaian *et al*. 2010). Note, for example, the outbreak of West Nile fever in northern Tel Aviv, in June of 2024 (Walla Health 2024), which resulted in over 900 reported cases and 73 deaths (Ministry of Health 2025) in the past season alone (Fig. 1).
- Protection of infrastructure and buildings from pests such as termites (Su & Scheffrahn 2000) and rodents (Corrigan 2001). Remarkable in this regard are the appearance of the Formosan termite (*Coptotermes formosanus*) in Petach Tikva (State Comptroller 2022), and the 2023 rodent outbreak in Bnei Brak that resulted in several bites of children (Koren Kariv 2023).

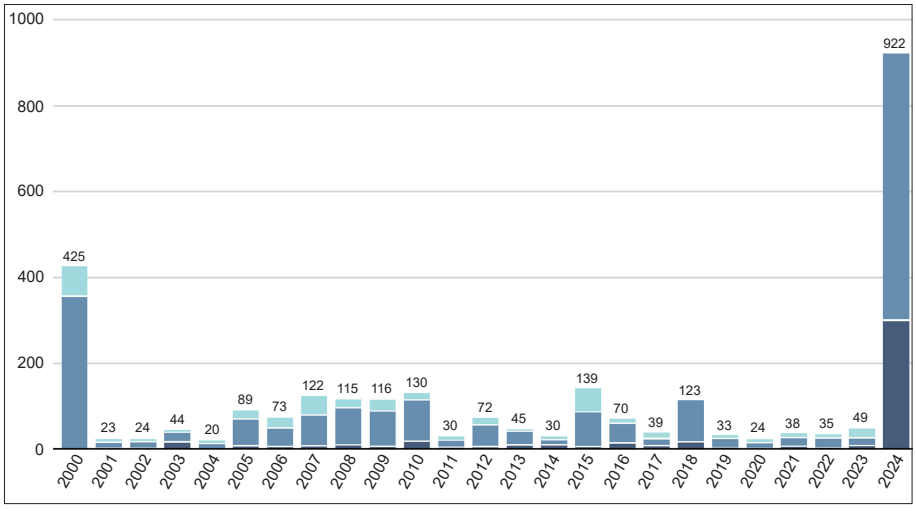

Fig. 1. Cases of West Nile fever in Israel. October–December cases (light blue) not shown for 2024.

- Important prophylactic action during the war. On 23 June 2025, Dovev Agari (Head of the Pests and Urban Pest Management Department) published a report on the importance of prophylactic and pest control actions in the case of hazards:

> "The State of Israel is in the midst of active warfare, in parallel to the peak of the warm season, which even routinely is prone to increased risk of pest outbreak… Every breeding site of mosquitoes, increased rodent activity, or propagation of flies requires immediate treatment, including removal of carcasses, waste removal, stillwater drainage, and trap placement. In case of need, sanitary pest control must be performed by a licensed urban pest management specialist." (Agari 2025)

EXTERMINATOR TRAINING AND LICENSING

Up until 2016, the subject of urban pest management was governed by the *Business Licensing Regulations* (MEP 1975), which specified requirements and guidelines for pest control to ensure it was performed professionally and safely, minimizing risks to humans and the environment. In the 2000s, the responsibility of training new licensed urban pest management specialists moved from licensed exterminator courses operated by the Ministry of Health, to private colleges. In that period, the official document certifying specialists was the "pest extermination permit" (היתר הדברה): a separate license for eradicating insects, rodents, or insects and rodents, or for fumigation. In addition, there were "pest control workers" (עובד הדברה) permitted to work under the supervision and instruction of a licensed urban pest management specialist, according to the conditions specified by regulation, but with no requirement for a course or examination, and no need for a pest control permit. Therefore, urban pest management companies relied mostly on pest control workers who worked via their employer's permit. There were no precise numbers reported, but it was estimated that there were around 500 pest control workers.

In 2014, two sisters (Avigail Gross, 4 years old, and Yael Gross, 2 years old) died in Jerusalem as a result of phosphine poisoning originating from an extermination event (Yarkoni 2021). In 2016, the *Law for the Regulation of the Practice of Urban Pest Management* was swiftly passed with the intention of "regulating the practice of pest control of pests to people and property, which is not for agricultural purposes, including the formation of guidelines for the training and oversight of those carrying out pest control work" (MEP 2016). Lawmakers determined a three-year adaptation period and an opportunity for companies to train their pest control workers as licensed urban pest management specialists through a transition plan until 2019. Additionally, the classification of licenses was changed to: (1) domestic, (2) structures and open spaces, (3) fumigation, and (4) military licensed urban pest management specialist (Appendix 1).

In 2020, the subject of training licensed urban pest management specialists in Israel was settled with the release of *Protocols for the Regulation of the Practice*

of Urban Pest Management (MEP 2020). The colleges became fully regulated by the Pests and Urban Pest Management Department. Whereas until 2020, anyone who wished to work in pest control could register for the governmental exam by the Ministry of Environmental Protection with no prerequisite for a recognized course, this changed when the new regulations went into effect.

Questions arise, in light of the importance of urban pest management in Israel, the abundance of sanitary invasive species (the little fire ant, the Formosan termite, the Asian tiger mosquito (*Aedes albopictus* (Skuse, 1894)), etc.), the high population growth (reaching 10 million), and the formation and expansion of urban pest management companies: How many licensed urban pest management specialists were there before the 2016 law took effect, and how many are there now, a decade later? How many licensed urban pest management specialists received permits/licenses since the 2020 training regulations? Is there a difference compared to the years before these regulations? And what is the rate of passing the examination for each of the license types?

THE SCOPE OF LICENSING OF LICENSED URBAN PEST MANAGEMENT SPECIALISTS

Data were collected over the years from publications on the governmental website by the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP 2025*a*), its newsletters (https://www.gov.il/en/pages/pestcontrol_newsletters), and annual reports, as well as through Freedom of Information Request (MEP 2025*b*; only contains data for 2022–2025). The number of registered licensed urban pest management specialists according to my monitoring has been hardly growing over the last decade (Fig. 2).

According to the Ministry of Environmental Protection, 520 people applied for the licensing examination in 2017, of which 270 (57%) passed and received a new

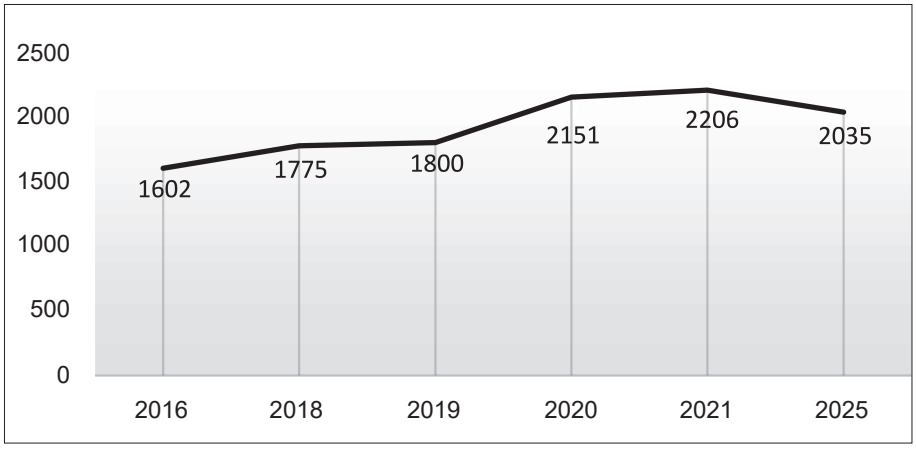

Fig. 2. The number of licensed urban pest management specialists in Israel in 2016–2025.

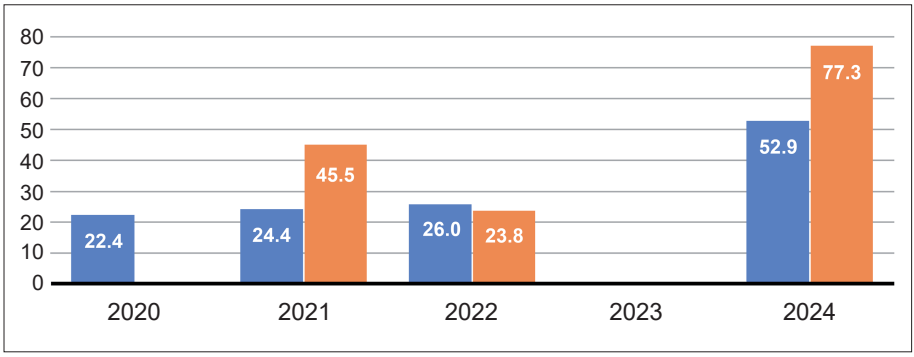

Fig. 3. Examination pass rates (%) in the licensing examination for urban pest management specialists in 2020–2024. Blue: domestic license; orange: open space license.

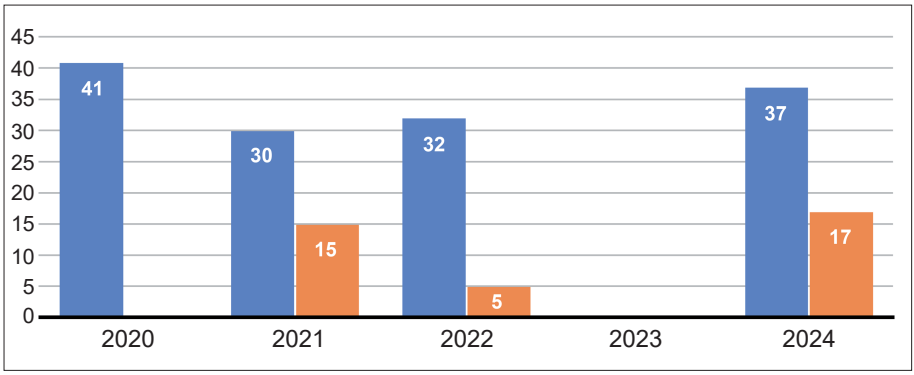

Fig. 4. Numbers of newly certified licensed urban pest management specialists in 2020–2024. Blue: domestic license; orange: open space license.

license as licensed urban pest management specialists, for all four types combined (domestic, structures and open spaces, fumigation, and military licensed urban pest management specialists). The pass rate data published by the Ministry (2020–2024) are divided between domestic licensed urban pest management specialists and open space licensed urban pest management specialists (Figs 3, 4; Table 1).

The Ministry has reported 140 domestic licensed urban pest management specialists and 37 new open space licensed urban pest management specialists between 2020 and 2024 (Table 1). The Freedom of Information Request reports 178 new domestic licensed urban pest management specialists and 42 new open space licensed urban pest management specialists between 2022 and 2025 (Table 2). As of June 2025, Israel has officially certified 309 fumigation licensed urban pest management specialists, 596 domestic licensed urban pest management specialists, and 1046 structures and open spaces licensed urban pest management specialists (MEP 2025*c*).

Table 1. The number and pass rates of domestic and open space licensed urban pest management specialists in 2020–2024, according to the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP 2025*a*).

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Domestic licensed urban pest management specialists	41 (22.4%)	30 (24.4%)	32 (26.0%)	—	37 (52.9%)
Open space licensed urban pest management specialists	—	15 (45.5%)	5 (23.8%)	—	17 (77.3%)

Table 2. The number and pass rates of domestic and open space licensed urban pest management specialists in 2022–2025, according to Freedom of Information Request (MEP 2025*b*).

	2022	2023	2024	2025
Domestic licensed urban pest management specialists	47 (22%)	10 (31%)	36 (56%)	85 (63%)
Open space licensed urban pest management specialists	8 (17%)	0 (0%)	17 (100%)	17 (61%)

The numbers obtained through Freedom of Information Request (Appendix 2) contradict those reported by the Ministry itself in its 2024 newsletter (Appendix 3). For example, the number of examinees sitting a theory exam for domestic licensed urban pest management specialist was 130, and not 145 as reported, and 30 in the open spaces licensed urban pest management specialist exam compared to the reported 64 individuals.

DISCUSSION

The data presented here raise fundamental questions regarding the degree to which the professional workforce in the field of urban pest management is adapted to the developing ecological and health needs of a modern country. Despite the importance of licensed urban pest management specialists in the field—for preventing the spread of diseases, maintaining infrastructure, and strengthening environmental resilience in case of emergency—it cannot be said that there is systematic, accurate and transparent monitoring of the workforce size or the level of their training.

Decline in the urban pest management workforce

Despite the significant increase of the Israel populace, and in urban development, the spread of invasive pests and the growing incidence of sanitary hazards – the number of officially licensed urban pest management specialists in Israel does not reflect this trend, and it even appears that their number has decreased or stalled in recent years. Is this pattern an official reduction or actual decrease? It is possible that the decline in the number of licensed specialists in recent years is not due to a real drop in the number of people working in the field, but rather to a technical purge of old records from the national pest management licensing database, removing the

names of exterminators who have ceased to actually practice in the field. If such a 'data cleansing' is indeed the reason, it can be hoped that it will be carried out transparently, with official reporting and an accompanying paperwork, since these statistics have implications for the national policy in the training, licensing and supervision of urban pest management, and preparedness for future hazards.

Where have the pest control workers gone? Another point that must be examined is the almost complete disappearance of 'pest control workers', a group that until 2016 played a central role in the industry, and was phased out following the *Law for the Regulation of the Practice of Pest Control* (MEP 2016). Is the urban pest management market currently absorbing the same people following new training? Or is this a systemic failure that has caused tens or hundreds of capable workers to simply disappear from the officially certified workforce? As the number of pests increases (as in the case of invasive fire ants, subterranean termites and virus-carrying mosquitos) the absurdity intensifies: just as demand increases, the supply of licensed specialists decreases. This may indicate failures in the training system, difficulties in passing the exams (especially in the years 2020–2022), lack of incentive, or lack of sufficient funds for the regulatory and certification system.

Lack of transparency, cooperation and research

The information published by the Ministry of Environmental Protection is partial, fragmented, and sometimes even contradictory. The fact that the passing data for the residential and open space urban pest management licensing exams are not published systematically, as well as the lack of data on practical certification or dropouts from the profession, make it difficult to obtain a complete and reliable picture of the situation. Requests submitted under the *Freedom of Information Law* have only partially been answered, in a way that reduces the capacity for research, planning and public oversight. Since the publication of the last significant survey (Mumcuoglu & Shalom 2011), no in-depth research has been published in which licensed specialists from the field participated. This is a serious gap, since urban pest management specialists are the public's first line of defense against pests and diseases, and they are the ones who experience the needs in the field and could provide otherwise undetected shortcomings and failures in the system.

CONCLUSIONS

An effective urban pest management system does not rely solely on pesticides, but first and foremost on highly qualified, informed and accountable professionals, who are able to operate in both routine and emergency situations. The data presented in the article highlight the urgent need to reexamine training processes, licensing levels, supervisory mechanisms and cooperation with all involved stakeholders.

Conflict of interest and funding disclosure: The author is an independent (self-employed) practitioner in urban pest management. This research received no specific funding from any government, public, commercial or not-for-profit agency or sector. The opinions and conclusions expressed are solely those of the author.

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Appendix 1

Existing types of urban pest control specialist licenses.

Domestic extermination

Open spaces extermination

Fumigation extermination

Military extermination

Appendix 2

The numbers of passed and failed examinees, obtained through Freedom of Information Request (MEP 2025*b*).

Year	College	Examination date	License type	Number of examinees	Passed	Failed
2022	Or Yehuda College	13/04/2022	Home	7	2	5
		29/09/2022	Home	24	15	9
	Mishlav College	13/04/2022	Home	33	10	23
		29/09/2022	Home	5	4	1
		13/04/2022	Open space	6	2	4
		29/09/2022	Open space	3	1	2
2023	Or Yehuda College	05/12/2023	Home	23	20	3
		20/02/2023	Home	6	–	6
	Mishlav College	05/12/2023	Home	20	18	2
		20/02/2023	Home	5	–	5
			Open space	2	–	2
2024	Or Yehuda College	18/07/2024	Home	6	2	4
		15/12/2024	Home	33	25	8
	Kinneret College	15/12/2024	Home	29	20	9
		18/07/2024	Home	21	7	14
	Mishlav College	18/07/2024	Home	6	4	2
		15/12/2024	Home	3	–	3
		18/07/2024	Open space	1	1	–
		15/12/2024	Home	29	22	7
		22/12/2024	Open space	26	26	–
	Ramat Gan College	15/12/2024	Home	18	11	7
		18/07/2024	Open space	29	21	8
		22/12/2024	Open space	8	8	–

Appendix 3

The number of examinees and passing/failing rates reported by the Ministry of Environmental Protection in its 2024 Newsletter (reproduced and translated from https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/pestcontrol_newsletters/he/PestControl_newsletter-2024.docx).