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California's War on Bugs Has Failed

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New research by UC Davis scientists shows that several fruit flies, including the infamous medfly, are now permanent residents of California despite nearly 300 “eradication” projects spanning three decades and costing billions. This study adds to the growing scientific evidence that declaring war on bugs with the intent of eliminating them – a practice that exposes Californians to some of the most toxic pesticides – doesn’t work.

Fruit flies are just another addition to the list of insects for which California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) eradication programs have failed. Despite decades of costly, hazardous efforts against pests such as the light brown apple moth, European grapevine moth, Japanese beetle, and 10-plus species of fruit flies, **not a single pest insect has been eradicated in California.**

Meanwhile, many of these insects have spread as CDFA continues to attack them with chemicals that endanger health, bees, and other wildlife. Some insects reappear over and over, often several times yearly at the same places where CDFA repeatedly declares them “eradicated.”

Commenting on the new fruit fly study, Edwin Lewis, professor and vice-chair of the UC Davis Entomology and Nematology Department and Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Biological Control* says: “This meticulous research indicates that the current model for managing invasive pests - predicated on eradication - is no longer feasible with these insects in California. This means rethinking the current eradication tools and revising our expectations for intended outcomes, not just in this case, but with invasive species in general.”

CDFA’s current approach threatens our health. Many remember controversial aerial malathion spraying for the medfly over southern California and the San Francisco area during the 1980s



A likely malathion spraying, Photo credit: [CA Dept of Fish & Agriculture](#)

and 90s. CDFA still aerially sprays the nervous system toxin malathion today for other bugs, and uses other hazardous chemicals linked to a multitude of health impacts, including cancer, miscarriages, birth defects, and genetic damage, posing special risks to children because of their small size and rapidly growing bodies. Even the supposedly “safer” pesticides, such as spinosad, are lethal to bees and aquatic life.

This approach is also expensive, in tax dollars (billions for fruit flies, nearly \$100 million for the apple moth), undocumented health costs from chronic pesticide exposures, and costs to farmers (for multiple quarantines, pre-harvest pesticide treatments, inspections).

Despite growing scientific evidence that eradication is impossible and that pesticides cause long-term health damage, CDFA persists in this failed approach. Even though public outcry ended the medfly aerial spray in the 1990s, CDFA turned again to aerial spraying in 2007 for the light brown apple moth until public opposition and hundreds of spray-related illness reports stopped that program.

Currently, CDFA is preparing the sweeping Statewide Pest Programmatic Environmental Impact Report, to give itself authority to apply pesticides anywhere in the state, any time in the future, for any pest. The Pest PEIR would also prevent affected communities from stopping the treatments.

Continuing these dangerous, outdated practices is not the answer. California needs a new pest management approach. This approach must recognize: 1) We cannot afford the costs and exposures of intensive chemical attacks on pests. 2) We don't have the resources to extend the current approach to every damaging pest that will arrive with globalization and climate disruption. 3) Protecting health and our ecosystem must be top priorities along with reducing regulatory burdens on farmers and supporting them in transitioning to safe, effective pest management approaches.

How do we make this shift?

First, bring the best scientific minds together to re-envision state pest policy with an end-goal of controlling rather than totally eliminating pests, using methods that protect health.

Second, support more research on sustainable, farm-friendly methods, like biological insect control, that don't rely on chemicals that threaten health. We urgently need to stop using pesticides that threaten bees. Several crops, such as the state's high-value almonds, could fail if bees continue to decline.

Third, redesign pest programs to reduce regulatory burdens on farmers and streamline costs. Farmers need regulatory relief, such as creation of certified “pest-free” zones for ease of shipping crops, and help using proven non-chemical pest management methods, such as beneficial parasitic insect releases.

California leaders must assure taxpayers that policy decisions protect human and environmental health as well as the viability and vitality of California agriculture. Policy must be based on sound science.

The courage, creativity, and will required to challenge the status quo and develop responsible

pest management and agricultural stewardship exist here in California. Now can be the moment that we work together to design a 21st-century approach.

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