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[Home](#) > [Blogs](#) > [megan's blog](#) > State Repeats Unsuccessful, Dangerous Beetle Spray Without Informing Public

State Repeats Unsuccessful, Dangerous Beetle Spray Without Informing Public

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The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) announced last week that it had already begun spraying Fair Oaks yards with pesticides that cause cancer, miscarriages, birth defects, and nervous system damage in an “emergency” bid to “eradicate” a beetle that has been turning up in the same neighborhood for nearly

30 years.

In a chilling preview of what will become standard procedure if CDFA’s “Statewide Pest Plant Environmental Impact Report” (Pest PEIR) is completed and approved, the agency’s press release reports that CDFA began spraying for the Japanese beetle even before the virtually unpublicized “community information” meeting about the treatments was held last Wednesday and before any information about this summer’s treatments was posted on the CDFA website.

CDFA’s reach for the metaphorical can of Raid rather than using the safer alternatives recommended by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is identical to the agency’s treatments in the same neighborhood last summer. CDFA insists that only highly toxic pesticides will “eradicate” the beetle.

It isn’t working. CDFA “eradicated” this same insect from the same neighborhood last summer using the same three pesticides, and “eradicated” the same insect from the same neighborhood during the 1980s using one of the same three pesticides.

Despite CDFA’s insistence that its pest management strategy relies on least-toxic methods, take a look at the pesticides the agency is spraying in Fair Oaks residents’ yards:

- Carbaryl (Sevin) - harms the human nervous and reproductive systems causes cancer;
- Cyfluthrin - causes genetic damage and reduced survival of newborns;
- Imidacloprid - linked to birth defects, genetic damage, and miscarriage.

The last two are poisonous to aquatic life, and all three are highly toxic to honeybees, whose

populations have seriously declined in recent years. The state performs no monitoring for health impacts of the spraying.

Why is the state forcibly exposing the public to these hazardous pesticides and refusing to use the less- and non-toxic alternatives recommended in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) handbook *Managing the Japanese Beetle*?

Among the USDA recommendations are use of predator insects and small roundworms (nematodes) as well as products made from a fungus called milky spore. These approaches are superior to the pesticides CDFA is using because, according to the USDA handbook, these biological controls “last longer in the environment. More importantly, they do not adversely affect non-target or potentially beneficial organisms.” Traps can also control the beetles, and products made from the naturally insect repellent oil of the tropical neem tree may also be effective.

CDFA’s reasons for refusing to use the safer USDA-recommended alternatives include some scientifically questionable assertions, for example that the use of nematodes is “problematic because soil type, moisture and temperature can influence their effectiveness. Nematodes need a fairly loose textured soil (sand, loamy sand, or sandy loam).”

However, Soils of Sacramento County California indicates that the soils in the treatment zone are, in fact, sandy loams. According to entomologist Ron Whitehurst of Rinconvitova Insectary, nematodes can be used successfully against the Japanese beetle in soil temperatures from 55° F to 86° F. Soil temperatures are currently within that range.

In other words, all the conditions for nematodes to be effective are met in the treatment zone. Why is CDFA not using nematodes or at a minimum allowing their use as an alternative to chemical sprays, for those with health concerns and organic crops?

CDFA’s rejection of another safer option, milky spore, is based on outdated research from the 1980s regarding its effectiveness.

The question is not whether Japanese beetle damages flowers, leaves, and lawn roots. The question is why the state is using extremely hazardous treatments on private property with little or no public notice when less toxic methods are available.

Public officials’ bad habit of reaching directly for toxic chemicals and skipping safer alternatives is longstanding, from aerial medfly spraying in the 1980s to aerial mosquito and apple moth spraying over populated areas during the current decade. Not only is this approach dangerous, it doesn’t work. For example, CDFA has carried out more than 387 “emergency” insect eradications from 1982-2008, most of them repeating every year for the same 9 pests. Repeated annual “eradications” are not eradicating anything; they are simply a massive control program that is costly, both in terms of dollars and health and environmental hazards. In many if not all cases, control can be achieved by much less toxic methods. The state’s strategy is long overdue for a change.

Moreover, in the case of the Japanese beetle, which was trapped in this neighborhood in the 1980s and has been trapped in the same location for the past three years, why does CDFA insist that finding the beetle this year constitutes an “emergency?”

The law clearly defines an emergency as a “sudden” and “unexpected” occurrence. The emergence of the beetle in Fair Oaks this summer is only sudden and unexpected if you’re Rip Van Winkle and have been asleep a long time.

A modern adage says: insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

Furthermore, the almost complete lack of public notice prior to this year’s beetle spray is in direct contradiction to CDFA’s assertions that the agency goes “above and beyond” in public engagement and that there is plenty of opportunity for public input before a treatment is carried out. In this case, the public did not have an opportunity to weigh in until after the spray had begun. Moreover, CDFA is under no obligation to change anything about its treatment no matter what the public says.

Unfortunately, these kinds of spray programs and this lack of meaningful public participation will become business as usual if the CDFA presses ahead with and approves the Pest PEIR, which has been in the works for more than a year. The Pest PEIR would give the agency carte blanche to spray anywhere in the state, any time, for almost any pest, with no notice, no public input, and no further review of the local health and environmental impacts of the treatments. (For more information, see: [http://www.cal-ehi.org/Pest PEIR.html](http://www.cal-ehi.org/Pest_PEIR.html))

Rather than spending millions attempting to distort the purpose of the state’s environmental protection laws by preparing the Pest PEIR and continuing with its kneejerk spray approach, CDFA should develop a scientifically sound and up-to-date pest management approach that respects the fundamental tenets of integrated pest management: define a rational objective, use non-toxic methods first, use chemicals only as a last resort and only in the context of a realistic plan for modifying activities in the affected area or crop so that repeated chemical use is not necessary.

Scientists at University of California, Davis this spring convened a group of the best minds in the field, from institutions across North America, to develop a new approach to pest management. CDFA would do well to abandon its ill-conceived Pest PEIR and listen hard to what this group publishes in the coming months.

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