

<http://www.sacbee.com/2011/08/09/3825031/state-ag-agency-again-bombs-bugs.html>

Viewpoints: State ag agency again bombs bugs instead of examining alternatives

By Nan Wishner and Steven Zien

Special to The Bee

Published: Tuesday, Aug. 9, 2011 - 12:00 am | Page 11A

Last Modified: Tuesday, Aug. 9, 2011 - 7:00 am

The [California Department of Food and Agriculture](#) last week began spraying approximately 100 Fair Oaks backyards for the Japanese beetle, using pesticides that pose serious risks.

Homeowners were given three days' notice of what was announced as a mandatory spray program to combat the spread of Japanese beetles, three of which have been discovered. Although at least one resident was reportedly able to opt out of the spraying, CDFA officials did little or nothing to offer non-toxic alternatives to residents who might have health concerns or organic gardens.

This program is a poster child for why the state's approach has to change.

The CDFA's knee-jerk reaching for the metaphorical can of Raid and spraying on a moment's notice endangers health and the environment, and is not necessary. Safer alternatives exist. In this case, even the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) recommends less toxic approaches.

The pesticides being used in Sacramento include carbaryl, which harms the human nervous and reproductive systems, and may cause cancer; cyfluthrin, which causes genetic damage and reduced survival of newborns; and imidacloprid, which is 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.

No human health impact monitoring is being performed for the beetle treatments.

The [USDA Japanese Beetle Handbook](#) recommends several non-toxic approaches, including use of predator species such as native Tiphia wasps and small roundworms called nematodes, and products made from a fungus called milky spore. The USDA notes that biological control agents "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 neem oil (a natural pesticide) may also be effective.

A CDFA entomologist reports that, during the last California Japanese beetle eradication in Sacramento, in 1983, homeowners who objected to pesticide spraying on their property were offered non-toxic alternatives, including tarping of lawns and removal of fruit from susceptible plants.

We do not dispute that the Japanese beetle damages flowers, leaves and lawn roots, and that it is preferable to keep this insect, which is established on the East Coast and in some Midwestern states, out of California if possible. However, a thorough assessment of the health and environmental risks of the treatments chosen must be made before the state sprays neighborhoods.

The CDFA has dismissed USDA's nontoxic or least-toxic alternative treatment recommendations.

As one example, CDFA entomologist Kevin Hoffman rules out the use of nematodes, concluding that their success 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)."

The CDFA evidently did not investigate the soil in the treatment zone. "Soils of Sacramento County California," by Walter W. Weir, says that these soils are, in fact, sandy loams. Entomologist Ron Whitehurst of Rincon-Vitova Insectaries states that nematodes can be used successfully against the Japanese beetle in soil temperatures from 55 degrees to 86 degrees Fahrenheit. Currently, soil temperatures range around 74 degrees.

CDFA's discounting of this nontoxic option is unsubstantiated. All the requirements 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 option, milky spore, is based on outdated research regarding effectiveness from the 1980s.

The state's bad habit of reaching directly for toxic chemicals and skipping safer alternatives is longstanding, from aerial medfly spraying in the 1980s to aerial apple moth spraying in 2007.

Not only is this approach dangerous, it doesn't work. The state carried out 274 eradications between 1982 and 2008 for the same nine pests every year. Repeating annual "eradications" are simply a massive control program. This strategy is long overdue for a change.

Unfortunately, instead of listening to health and environmental groups and organic growers urging a new, nontoxic approach, the CDFA is pushing forward with a Statewide Plant Pest Programmatic Environmental Impact Report that could lock in place its

largely toxic and ineffective strategy for decades to come. As in the past, it will leave the public with no options to oppose a dangerous program like the current beetle spraying.

We urge the state to step back, recognize that spraying toxic chemicals in our communities and on our food is no longer acceptable, and to rely on the latest science to design a nontoxic pest management paradigm for the 21st century.

© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.