

MOTH | Residents wary of state's spraying plan

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But he's having a hard time selling that argument to Santa Cruz and Monterey county residents, who filed a lawsuit to stop the spraying and have complained in record numbers to their legislators.

Government promises and experts aside, residents fret that the chemicals aren't safe and that their impacts on humans haven't been rigorously tested. Besides, they argue, why would anyone who remembers the initial assurances for DDT or even the Iraq war believe the government?

Some take it further: They accuse the pheromones' manufacturer of cozy ties with the governor: They fume that it's wrong for the state to drizzle chemicals over their private property without permission.

Secret ingredients

Adding to the suspicion and ire is the manufacturer's reluctance to fully disclose all the ingredients in the pheromone compound known as Checkmate, citing trade secrets.

Jim R. Baumgartner is a Felton resident who is moving to Santa Cruz in early November, the same week as the scheduled spraying there. He remembers the Medfly battles from his childhood in Southern California, when the state advised people to cover their cars because malathion was fine for humans but bad for paint jobs. His home was outside the targeted zone but got sprayed anyway.

It's a slippery slope, he said. If people get comfortable with the government spraying them with undisclosed chemicals, what else can the government douse them with? If the phero-

mones can confuse male moths, he questioned, couldn't a homophobic biochemist one day use it against gay men?

"Anytime they say, 'Trust us,'" Baumgartner said, "alarm bells go off."

State scientists first trapped the light brown apple moth in late February. The mottled critter, native to Australia, has an appetite that belies its half-inch size: Its larvae eat about 250 varieties of plants. The yellow-brown moth is a threat to everything from backyard tomatoes, to majestic oak trees, to the floral fields hugging the coastline.

Officials worry the moth will not only endanger the environment, but also nibble away a good portion of the state's \$38 billion agricultural industry.

Workers set out traps and found the moth in 9,125 sites scattered across California. Of those, 7,418 were in Santa Cruz County.

After consulting with experts from Australia and Hawaii — which have long dealt with the moth — state officials decided to employ pheromones. In areas where there's a small infestation, like San Jose, they put out pheromone-soaked twist ties.

But for larger swaths, Lyle said, aerial spraying was more efficient. It's the first time the state has ever aerially sprayed pheromones as a pest control tactic. The pheromone compound has been approved by the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Pesticide Regulation. Officials say it's preferable to insecticides, which often indiscriminately kill bugs, including beneficial ones.

Pilots began flying over Monterey County last month, hop-

ing to contain the perimeter before zeroing in on the infestation's epicenter — Santa Cruz County.

A judge temporarily halted the Monterey County spraying last week, and a court hearing is scheduled for Thursday. The legal wrangling makes it unclear whether the state can spray Santa Cruz County in early November as planned. Some residents and the Santa Cruz City Council are hoping no.

'Biochemical pesticide'

"We feel that to aerial spray a biochemical pesticide over urban populations is an extreme overreaction by state officials," said a woman with the Web site lbamspray.info who said her name was Lori Cioffi. The volunteer group opposes the spray strategy, urging Web site visitors to "Stop county-wide biochemical residential spraying!!" with "biochemical" in bright red letters and underlined.

The Monterey County spraying prompted health complaints from more than 100 residents, who listed everything from respiratory troubles to profuse sweating, said Monterey County assistant agricultural commissioner Robert Roach.

Only one of those complaints came from someone's doctor, who tagged it as pesticide-related, Roach said. The department is investigating the reports.

The health concerns don't trouble Christine Altermann, production manager at Soquel Nursery Growers. She's familiar with agricultural chemicals and feels the pheromones are relatively safe.

However, she's not convinced all the worry about a massive

moth infestation is warranted.

The moth has been found at her nursery, prompting a shutdown and large-scale chemical spraying each time. But Altermann notes that the moth hasn't seemed to cause significant damage to the plants.

Which is why she wonders why the state is spraying in the fall, when rains will diffuse the pheromones. She speculates the state is really making "a big show" for its trading partners, since the United States demands strict regulations from other countries. Still, she doesn't blame her neighbors for being nervous.

"People are concerned about having a chemical sprayed all over their entire property — on their houses, on their pets, on everything," Altermann said. They "don't trust the government when the government says it's safe. The government has been wrong about things."

Roach supports the spraying. The agriculture department has a key mission: to prevent pests. "If we can't accomplish that," he said, "we're just opening the doors to every invasive, exotic pest that slips past our borders."

His office was surprised by the amount of community ire. Perhaps there wasn't enough outreach, he said, "and I think you had a general distrust of the government coming into play."

Last week, the state scheduled more public meetings to discuss the moth. Perhaps, Roach said, they could bring additional scientists to assure the jittery public— scientists who don't work for the government.

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