

Moth had county atwitter

Light Brown Apple Moth

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State's plans to spray pesticide met with loud protest

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SANTA CRUZ — It was, by far, one of the most divisive and polarizing issues in Santa Cruz County in 2007.

The state's aerial spraying of the light brown apple moth, which started out as a warning in the summer, became a reality in the fall. It had scores of residents worried, despite government assurances to the contrary, that the pesticide was unsafe for human contact and could get into water supplies and harm wildlife.

Their fears were stoked when the manufacturer of the pesticide CheckMate LBAM-F, Suterra LLC, refused to disclose the key ingredients and cited trade privacy law in its defense.

The state Department of Food and Agriculture told residents, in public hearings and town hall meetings, that the pesticide was merely a scent — a synthetic pheromone of a female moth that was designed to confuse all the male moths, hopefully disrupting mat-

NEWSMAKER OF THE YEAR



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

The state's aerial spraying of the light brown apple moth stirred rounds of protests and heated debate in 2007.

ing patterns and resulting in a population crash.

Independent chemists contacted by the Sentinel weren't too worried about the pes-

ticide, saying there are worse chemicals that could get into the environment and residents shouldn't fear every chemical.

"Every human activity has some risk, but this in my view is reasonable in terms of risk versus benefits," Greg Moller, an associate professor of environmental chemistry and toxicology at the University of Idaho, told the Sentinel in November. "We have to be careful of accusing every chemical that's being used in an industrial society as a bad chemical."

The state also said the moths had to be eliminated to protect California's agricultural industry, especially in Santa Cruz County, where there were more than 8,000 of them were trapped over several months — making it by far the biggest infestation found in the state.

California could suffer millions of dollars in crop losses if it didn't act quickly, officials said, often comparing their eradication efforts to a growing forest fire.

"If you saw a fire, you'd put it out, wouldn't