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Plant Protection Today: USDA and California Department of Food and Agriculture Join Forces to Safeguard Agriculture

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Federal and State Employees Double Down to Eradicate Fruit Flies

By Sharon Lucik

“Persistent Protection” is how The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) describes its fruit fly activities. In a typical year, experienced CDFA employees successfully manage invasive fruit fly incursions and eradications on their own. Their actions—together with regulatory assistance from the USDA Animal Plant Health Inspection Services’ (APHIS) Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program—protect the state’s $50 billion agricultural industry. That all changed last year when PPQ’s California State Plant Health Director Helene Wright received a call from her counterpart, California’s State Plant Regulatory Official Dr. Andrew R. Cline.

“It was August when Andy called,” Wright said. “The *Zeugodacus tau* fruit fly (*Z tau*) quarantine had expanded from 79 to 105 square miles, and he asked if PPQ staff could help set eradication traps. In all my years in California, it was the first time CDFA had ever reached out to us to help with trapping. ”

Within a week PPQ mobilized the first 10 volunteers for *Z. tau*. Within days after that, PPQ and CDFA staff were hanging Jackson traps—baited with a mixture of attractant and pesticide—in Los Angeles County. When fruit fly quarantine areas increased, PPQ expanded its California Fruit Fly Emergency Response and asked for more employee volunteers.

Since then, PPQ has continued to answer the call. To date, over 420 employees have deployed to California—some multiple times—to respond to an unprecedented number of fruit fly detections in northern and southern California.

“We’re in an unusual situation and its challenging both federal and state resources, “ said Wright. “We’re eradicating four fruit fly species—Mediterranean, Oriental, Queensland, and *Z tau*—in portions of six counties. And if you add all of the quarantine areas together, it’s 1,248 square miles. That’s larger than the state of Rhode Island.”

Although no formal pathway analysis has been completed yet, most fruit fly detections are in residential areas versus in commercial agriculture. That points a

finger to human behaviors and could explain what's going on in the state. For years APHIS' HungryPests campaign has cautioned about the ways people can spread invasive pests. CDFA's public outreach is advancing those messages, in addition to keeping homeowners aware of local eradication efforts.

APHIS' Public Affairs Specialist Palmer Pinckney II, services a fruit fly trap in a residential area in California's Rancho Cucamonga. Pinckney who served in the U.S. Navy for 27 years, left his Washington state home in December to help California colleagues safeguard their agricultural industry. Photo by: Brad Newbury, USDA

Looking ahead, California will need PPQ's help for the foreseeable future. "Our goal is to provide about 60 employees every three weeks to help CDFA staff set and service traps," said PPQ's Team Delta Incident Commander Michael Hennessey. "Our two agencies have come together as one. We're in lockstep and focused on eradication."

In December U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack approved the transfer of funds from the Commodity Credit Corporation to address emergency outbreaks of animal and plant pests and diseases. USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service is using $103.5 million of the funding to respond to the threats associated with outbreaks of exotic fruit flies in California and increase preventive activities in other susceptible areas in the United States.

The fruit fly species detected in California—Mediterranean, Oriental, Queensland, and Z. *tau*—are in the family Tephritidae. They are among the most destructive, feared and well-publicized pests of fruits and vegetables around the world, and pose the greatest risk to U.S. agriculture. Tephritid fruit flies spend their larval stages feeding and growing in over 400 host plants. Introduction of these pest species into the United States causes economic losses from destruction and spoiling of host commodities by larvae, costs associated with implementing control measures, and loss of market share due to restrictions on shipment of host commodities. The extensive damage and wide host range of tephritid fruit flies become obstacles to agricultural diversification and trade when pest fruit fly species become established.

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