
Science & Technology

Collusion with fruit flies: a chronology

by Carol Cleary

In 1955-56, and again in 1962-63, the state of Florida eradicated infestations of the Mediterranean fruit fly, or medfly, in its rich agricultural areas using aerial malathion-spraying programs. In 1966, Texas successfully used the same program to eliminate the same pest. But in 1981, after malathion aerial sprays had been used safely for 30 years, Gov. Jerry Brown of California insisted on using ineffective Chinese techniques to contain the problem. The following chronology summarizes how Governor Brown placed California's \$18 billion agro-industry in jeopardy.

May 5, 1980: Adult medflies are discovered in suburban San Jose and Santa Clara counties in California. Brown begins the release of 120 million sterile fruit flies a week at a cost of over \$25 million, rather than allow pesticides to be aerially sprayed.

November 1980: The medfly problem explodes; Governor Brown declares a state of emergency in Santa Clara and Alameda counties and mandates a compulsory human-wave fruit-stripping program, in addition to the continued use of sterile male flies.

March 1, 1980: The states of Texas and Florida, with support from other southern states, begin to embargo California fruit from infested areas. The ban is conditionally lifted one week later after the intervention of the U.S. Agriculture Department to seek a negotiated settlement.

April 1981: Supporters of Jerry Brown in the San Francisco Bay area bid in court to halt all future aerial spraying of malathion over their cities, but the federal judge dismisses the case.

June 26, 1981: More medflies are discovered in traps in

suburban areas in California. Spread of the flies could threaten the state's \$18 billion agro-industry.

July 9, 1981: In an atmosphere of intense crisis, Governor Brown rules out aerial spraying of malathion on philosophical grounds. Instead, he orders roadblocks using the National Guard to search for infested fruit from contaminated areas.

The California Senate responds to Brown's insane control techniques with a 28 to 0 vote ordering the state's Department of Food and Agriculture to begin aerial spraying of malathion before the medfly, with its short, 10-day life cycle, spreads to agricultural areas. Senate Minority Leader Bill Campbell calls for Governor Brown's impeachment on the basis that Brown has incompetently handled the medfly problem over the past year. The California Assembly is called back into session to endorse the Senate vote to enforce aerial spraying.

In Washington, D.C., 28 congressmen from California send a letter to Agriculture Secretary John Block demanding a federal takeover of the medfly battle, beginning with immediate aerial spraying of malathion. The states of Florida and Texas again demand a quarantine. By late in the day, Secretary Block is considering signing an order that mandates a quarantine of California fruits if effective spraying is not immediately instituted to bring the infestation under control.

July 10, 1981: Governor Brown agrees reluctantly to allow aerial spraying of malathion to begin on July 14, but in doses that are roughly half of what has been successful in the past. Brown orders 800 California Conservation Corps youth and 500 to 1,000 National Guardsmen to occupy infested areas to begin a human-wave "people's effort" to strip all fruit over the July 11-12 weekend. Fines of \$500 or six months in jail are levied against property owners who fail to complete fruit-stripping by Monday, July 13.

July 18, 1981: Texas begins a quarantine against California fruit, but is blocked by the courts.

July 23, 1981: Brown issues a statement condemning the use of pesticides, published in the *Los Angeles Examiner*: "The issue of chemicals is not a trivial issue. . . . And as we begin to understand that we are part of nature, and if we begin to destroy a part of nature, we destroy a part of ourselves."

Aug. 15-17, 1981: Medflies spread from suburban counties into the San Joaquin Valley agricultural heartland of California. Three California state legislators, Ken Madry (D), John Thurmond (R), and Assembly Minority Leader Carol Hallet (R), join State Sen. Bill Campbell's call for Brown's impeachment.