
California Pestilence

Dustbowls, superbugs: Don't blame God

by Brian Lantz

On Thanksgiving weekend, 17 people died on California's Interstate 5 as at least 93 cars and 11 semitractor-trailers piled up in a blinding dust storm. While the tragic story received wide national media coverage, nary a one spoke to the actual cause of the accident. It was prime California topsoil that fueled the dust storm that set down over that highway. Farmers in this area south of Fresno had been unable to plant their fields because of *man-made* water shortages. The topsoil of unplanted fields was swept into the air, on winds gusting up to 40 miles an hour.

In the 1930s, the dustbowl was a well-known sign of the economic depression and the concomitant destruction of American agriculture. So it should be viewed today. One should expect elected officials and experts to be calling for major water projects, for example. Instead, unreality still prevails and investigators of the Coalinga Interstate 5 disaster are bent on determining whether some poor truckdriver or Thanksgiving weekend driver can be blamed and charged with criminal negligence.

Family farmers hit hard

The Coalinga Interstate 5 disaster is only the latest expression of the catastrophes hitting the California family farmer. Pestilence, in the form of the Poinsettia Whitefly, is ravaging the Imperial Valley, and is spreading north. Outstripping the man-made drought in its short-term effects, the Poinsettia Whitefly has already destroyed approximately 25% of the nation's winter fresh vegetable crop.

Unlike most agricultural pests, the whitefly has a wide host range, chomping on crops ranging from alfalfa to cotton to sugar beets and grapes. The fly removes four to five times as much of the sap of the plant as the cotton strain of the whitefly that hit California's Imperial Valley in 1981. Now, the Poinsettia Whitefly has made its way to the San Joaquin Valley, stretching from central to northern California.

Here, over 60% of California's crops are grown, which represents over \$12 billion of the state's \$18 billion in agricultural produce.

In a classic case of understatement, entomologist Thomas Perring of the University at California at Riverside recently told reporters: "Obviously, something has gone badly out of balance."

Perring was speaking about the Poinsettia strain of the whitefly and the surprising speed with which it took hold, hitting fields in northern Mexico, Arizona, and, most dramatically, California. Dr. Perring only limply proposed the equivalent of an invasion of ladybugs to counter the whitefly, a solution which was already tried against the Mediterranean Fruit Fly (Medfly) under kooky Gov. Jerry Brown. The Medfly is still around and probably has gone native.

Is it a 'superbug'?

The national media are now building the Poinsettia Whitefly up as "superbug," impervious to pesticides and known parasites. Already there is serious talk of letting the Imperial Valley lie fallow for years to deny the whitefly a livelihood—like shooting the patient to stop the spread of influenza.

According to respected California entomologists interviewed by *EIR*, the Poinsettia Whitefly could, in all likelihood, be either completely eradicated or controlled—without shutting down the most capital-intensive center of agriculture in the world. In fact, under circumstances which prevailed 20 years ago, with a broad arsenal of pesticides available as part of the "integrated pest management approach," the Poinsettia Whitefly might already be history.

Twenty years ago, systemic organo-phosphate materials were available. With the whitefly and pests such as scale, the best basic approach to control was to use a systemic pesticide, carried in the sap of the plant, killing the bug when it starts to munch on the plant. With the Poinsettia Whitefly, for example, the bug is difficult to kill at the earlier larval stage as the coat of the whitefly larva is difficult to penetrate with non-systemic, currently utilized pesticides.

However, federal and state environmental regulations no longer permit systemic organo-phosphates as part of our farmers' arsenal. So-called environmentalists and environmental laws banned their use or drove them out of the market.

After decades of looting of the American family farmer and his land by the grain cartel, and global genocidal policies that are creating and maintaining a petri dish for lower forms of insect life, there may now be something far more fundamentally "out of balance" with the biosphere as a whole, expressing itself through new strains of pests and disease. This is all the more reason to hit this whitefly with everything we've got in our arsenal.

Another danger is that, denied the use of parathion and even restricted in the use of DDT, the state of California's own mosquito abatement specialists are warning that the state faces the risk of an epidemic outbreak of Western Encephalitis (see *EIR*, Nov. 22, p. 10).