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The Medfly invasion

One of the most critical challenges to face agriculture in California in many years is the recent invasion of the destructive Mediterranean fruit fly into a largely urban area bordering the lower end of San Francisco Bay. The situation is being handled with the seriousness it warrants. The California Department of Food and Agriculture has quarantined the region and has undertaken an intensive program of fruit removal and ground treatment in an effort to eradicate the fly.

Because the insect is a Category "A" (highest risk) non-resident pest in California and the rest of mainland United States, and is under federal and state quarantine, research on its biology and control and treatment of infested fruits has been the responsibility of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating with research personnel in states and countries where the pest is established. Detection and eradication of this pest in California is the responsibility of the California Department of Food and Agriculture and County Agricultural Commissioners. Our specialists at the University of California have been aiding in these efforts of research and control.

I recently called together many of these University personnel and a representative of the USDA to assess the status of the Medfly problem and to determine our future role in combatting this menace. The gravity of the situation requires close coordination and cooperation of the University, the USDA, the California Department of Food and Agriculture and other state executive offices, the legislature, the agricultural community, county and municipal governments, and all citizens in infested areas.

Our concern goes beyond the immediate situation. If we succeed in eradicating the present invasion, how do we plan for the next one? It is predictable that periodic introductions of the Medfly will continue, probably near our major international air terminals. Existing techniques for detecting incipient infestations are reliable, but not without considerable cost. We must, however, design and implement an ongoing detection program in spite of the added cost, because the alternative of living with a wide area of quarantined California fruit and vegetables would entail costs with nearly disastrous consequences for producers, processors, and consumers alike. Cooperative research work on commodity postharvest treatment involving University of California and USDA personnel and supported in part by the agricultural commodity organizations, is already under way. We hope the results of this research won't be needed, but we dare not be without it.

The Medfly has been successfully eradicated in the past in both Florida and Texas as well as in California. Techniques for its control under conditions of early detection and localized infestations are highly successful. However, a new dimension in the control strategy has been introduced in the present fly invasion in a highly populated urban area. Aerial application of an effective and relatively safe pesticide has been a standard part of the eradication program in previous invasions in the United States. This initial step has been vigorously opposed by the urban communities involved in the current outbreak, who understandably fear for their personal health. Their mood is not likely to be easily changed, regardless of the soundness of the assurances of safety.

We need to put our creativity to work once again to devise methods for insect control in urban environments that will be acceptable to our friends and neighbors living there. Techniques that can be safely used in commercial agricultural areas may not always be acceptable in an urban setting.

The Medfly outbreak in California provides a vivid example of the way in which multiple agencies need to cooperate to meet a problem. No single agency could handle this matter alone. This cooperation characterizes much of the work that goes on day to day in many areas of agricultural research and extension. It is too bad that it takes a crisis to demonstrate that fact.

All of agriculture and its supporting services recognize the seriousness of this threatening pest invasion. That's not enough, however, to wage a successful battle. We need the support and understanding of all nonagricultural people too.

If the Medfly wins and establishes residence in California, the impact will be felt not only by growers or those in infested areas, but by every Californian.

Two new agricultural leaders

I am pleased to announce the appointment of two new system-wide administrators in the Division of Agricultural Sciences of the University of California.

On February 1, 1981, Lowell N. Lewis, formerly Associate Dean at the University's Riverside campus, became Assistant Vice President-Agriculture and University Services and Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station.

Effective January 1, Assistant Vice President Jerome B. Siebert was confirmed as Director of Cooperative Extension. He had been Associate Director, and then Acting Director of that unit.

Both men bring a rich background of experience to their new responsibilities, and I am confident that they will contribute materially to the programs of the Division.