

The Individual and State Spraying:

The case of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, the Japanese Beetle, and Citizens

The story that follows is a classic one of individuals facing government spray programs. In the process of (unsuccessfully) attempting to eradicate budworms, gypsy moths, fruit flies, or weeds, government agencies repeatedly (but not inevitably) jump to the service of agribusiness and chemical industry interests, deny the risks of their spray programs, convene bogus panels, and resist recommendations that integrated pest management be employed and that civil rights be observed. Some of the citizens being sprayed inevitably respond with energy, rather than despair: they learn everything they can, organize and educate their fellow citizens, promote legislation, litigate, and, on occasion, undertake civil disobedience. All the classical elements are here.

by Eleanore Sarah Wootton

"An incredible travesty against humanity" is the most succinct phrase that I can use to describe the tragic, toxic, nightmarish situation which has befallen my Fair Oaks home and the neighboring communities of Orangevale and Citrus Heights (CA). Tons of pesticides have been used by the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) in their frenzy to eliminate a minor population of Japanese beetles (*Popillia japonica*) in a shifting treatment area of some five square miles where approximately 18,000 people live. Ours is a community of homes, magnificent old oak trees, and century-old orchards of fruit and nut trees. It is a place where people moved to escape the city and to grow large gardens and raise children, pets and livestock. Close proximity to Sacramento, the state capitol, made the area desirable, and suburbia grew by taking over the larger plots of orchard and pasture.

On June 30, 1983, a Japanese beetle was found in a trap in Orangevale. Described by CDFA as a "voracious" plant eater (CDFA usually leaves out the word "plant"), the Japanese beetle feeds on over 275 different herbs, shrubs, and trees. In its larval stage it feeds on plant roots. There is one generation a year, the larvae emerging in the summer months. The beetle requires 10" of annual rainfall or summer irrigation in order to survive in the ground, making the large, unirrigated areas of California an unlikely reproductive site. The CDFA postulates crop losses amounting to \$94 million should the beetle become established statewide, but has yet to undertake a similar evaluation of burdens borne by residents in urban areas who are forced to undergo their eradication efforts.

Since the fateful June 30, some 98 beetles have been

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trapped, captured, or their pupae dug out of the ground in our communities.¹ Beetle number 99 was identified as having been planted in the ground when CDFA detected traces of a preservative in the fragile *corpus delicti*. It is unknown if other beetles were similarly planted in what is certainly a cruel hoax on unfortunate "zone" inhabitants.

Carbaryl

Our local nightmare began on July 1, 1983 with the arrival of CDFA spray crews and their trucks with tanks of Sevin 80S (carbaryl). The drone of their compressors became the accompanying lietmotiv to our "Symphonie Tragique" as the sickening odor of the chemical mixture filled the air and our lungs. We quickly learned to keep our windows closed from early morning through late afternoon to protect our interior spaces from penetration of the pesticides. Thoughtful parents forbade their children the pleasure of outdoor play. Our verdant landscape became a chemical repository as crews drenched all suspected "host" material with carbaryl, making the environment out of doors something to shun. Organic gardeners, such as myself, destroyed and tarped their gardens in order to minimize chemical pollution of the soil. Bee hives were moved from the area because carbaryl is highly toxic to bees, and pets and livestock were kept indoors or penned, if possible. The very quality of life was harshly reduced, and court orders were served to force the compliance of residents who objected.

Oftanol

Affiliated Citizens to Investigate Oftanol Now (ACTION), formed in response to the CDFA's announcement that there was more in store for us than some "harmless flea powder",—their one-liner for carbaryl. "Soil treatments are needed in addition to the foliar treatments", we were told. Chlordane was the chemical of choice, but luckily for us it is a banned chemical, so oftanol was promoted by a panel of entomologists selected by CDFA.² Because the use of oftanol is restricted by federal label to turf, diazinon, another organophosphate pesticide, was selected for use on orchards and pastures. Both pesticides are rated with a "moderate to high toxicity, and are irreversible cholinesterase inhibitors." That oftanol was not and had never been registered in the state of California was an obstacle CDFA quickly circumvented by applying for a "special local needs permit" (see "Watchdogging the SLN Process," NCAP NEWS 4(2):33-35).

The proposed use of oftanol was the issue that first aroused most of the residents. CDFA officials were unable to give satisfactory responses to questions about the chemical such as "Is

¹ Cholinesterase inhibitors poison an enzyme that allows for orderly transmission of nerve messages. The nervous system then becomes overloaded.