

Farmers' Flies Bug Suburbanites

BELTSVILLE, Md.— Flies from neighboring farms aren't one of the charms of country life, residents of many rural housing developments have discovered.

As a result, fly-bitten suburbanites have pressured farmers in some areas -- especially those raising livestock -- to eliminate the insects or evacuate their animals from nearby fields.

"It's a growing problem in almost all parts of the country, but

especially where developers are gobbling up farmlands," says Lawrence G. Pickens, a research entomologist with the federal Agricultural Research Service here.

The Agricultural Department estimates that nationally, new housing and other urban development claim 900,000 to 1.5 million acres annually.

Pickens speaks from firsthand experience. Maryland officials

gave the Beltsville center an ultimatum two years ago: Either control the flies or get rid of the farm animals.

So far the animals have stayed, thanks to an aggressive control program that Pickens devised. Improved traps and baits, which he hopes will ultimately have a nationwide impact, play a big part in his efforts.

"Until recently we've had trouble with baits," Pickens tells

National Geographic News Service. "Some have contained dangerous ingredients; others have either been smelly, costly, or difficult to prepare. But now I think we've come up with a winner."

The experimental concoction contains sugar, baking powder, yeast, honey, dried blood or fish meal, and banana flavoring. Two 1-inch cubes of the bait, shaped in an ordinary ice tray, are placed in a pan of water beneath a cylindrical aluminum trap. Once inside, the insects fly upward through a narrow cone, drawn by the sunlight that shines through the plexiglass top of the trap.

They can't escape, and starve to death within a day. As many as 20,000 flies can be captured in the trap before it has to be emptied.

A little knowledge of fly behavior makes traps and baits more effective. For instance, Pickens says, the insects cruise about 3 feet above the ground and like to fly along the edges of shrubs, fences, or rows of trees. Inside buildings they tend to go down near the floor and patrol the perimeter of a room. They have been known to cover 5 miles a day in search of food.

Laboratory tests have convinced Pickens that flies can discern some differences in colors and have a natural affinity for light. The bright white "Beltsville pyramid," another trap devised by the entomologist, shows great promise and is being tested at farms in the region.

Measuring 2 feet square at the base and standing 2 feet tall, the inexpensive plywood structure is covered with sheets of plastic treated with an adhesive that can snare 3,000 flies. The pyramid works better than other shapes because its surface reflects light uniformly, Pickens explains.

Scientists at the center are working on a weatherproof insecticide, harmless to animals, that would coat the pyramids. It would eliminate the nuisance of having to replace the sticky sheets when they become covered with flies.

Richard L. Pugh, a Highland, Md., dairy and grain farmer, credits the cylindrical traps with reducing fly-borne pinkeye disease among his heifers last year, and he has high hopes for the pyramids, which he has placed near his barns.

"Flies have always been a major nuisance for the farmer," he says. "In some cases they make life so miserable for cows that milk production is affected."

The demand for an efficient fly trap extends far beyond farms and suburbs, says Normand F. Reed of Hopedale, Mass., owner of the only company that makes the cylindrical traps.

The devices have been purchased by owners of restaurants, nursing homes, landfills, and ice cream parlors. "The best location for many traps is right by a dumpster," says Reed. "It's an incredible fly-breeding ground."



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A tempting dinner for a hungry fly might consist of sugar, baking powder, yeast, honey, dried blood or fish meal, and banana flavoring. The experimental bait, developed by the U.S. Agricultural Research Service, attracts the insects to a trap. It's one of several attractants being tested in Beltsville, Md., in response to burgeoning fly populations in suburbs next to farms, where flies thrive, particularly around livestock. Scientists are also working on other new types of traps.

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