

Agriculture by Susan B. Cohen

Med fly blight spreads in California

The Zen governor's protection of this pest may have severe consequences for the state and nation.

By refusing to authorize aerial spraying of pesticides in the San Francisco area to combat the med fly blight, California Governor Jerry Brown has just placed in jeopardy the state's \$14 to \$18 billion a year agricultural industry.

The crop-destroying med fly, or Mediterranean fruit fly, first appeared in Santa Clara County last summer.

But instead of taking the obvious step of aerial spraying with the proven and safe pesticide malathion, Brown's administration sent the California Conservation Corps and volunteer groups into the area of infestation to hand pick and destroy hundreds of tons of fruits and vegetables—a tactic reminiscent of Mao Tse-tung's campaign to rid China of flies.

In addition to being very costly and inefficient, the method did not work. Last week, state authorities registered 110 new incidents of med fly infestation just in Santa Clara County.

Did Governor Brown now heed the warnings of agricultural experts and authorize the aerial sprayings? No. At a press conference in Sacramento July 8, Brown announced that he was rejecting aerial sprayings over Santa Clara County, citing an alleged threat to pregnant women, and was instead ordering a "massive, all-out ground spraying" and mandatory fruit-stripping program to eliminate the pest.

The United States Department of Agriculture, meanwhile, is on record as stating that only aerial spraying can stop the pest from spreading.

The med fly is a dangerous agricultural pest that feeds on more than 200 varieties of fruit and vegetables. The fly, which infests parts of Europe, South America, and Hawaii, first appeared in California briefly in 1975. The Los Angeles County outbreak was stemmed, not through a \$700 million "sterile male" program, but by ground spraying with Baytex (malathion and fenthion) as authorized by the EPA.

The fly did not reappear until last summer, when it was presumably brought into the state in infested fruit from abroad. The state health department found the fly in localized residential areas near San Francisco.

Federal agricultural experts had advised aerial spraying with malathion, as has been done previously with no ill effects on the population in Texas and Florida. Texas, which suffered a major infestation in 1956, used malathion spraying to totally destroy the med fly. Moreover, malathion is widely used in home pest sprays.

In the recent California epidemic, Governor Brown allowed only a limited amount of ground spraying with malathion, and the release of sterilized male insects in an attempt

to sexually frustrate the flies. This last ploy has cost some \$170 million, per week, and has met with only limited success. Further, it is physically impossible to pick every kind of fruit known to be attacked by the med fly. A single fruit per square block of residential area will attract female flies from all over the neighborhood, and produce dozens to hundreds of new adults within a month.

While the flies went into dormancy last fall, they have now re-emerged and are again threatening California's crops. Both state legislative houses have passed resolutions calling for aerial spraying, along with the USDA. Despite Brown's control program, the fly has spread to 83 localities over a several hundred-square mile area in the Santa Clara Valley.

Although major agricultural areas have not yet been infested, some countries have begun to embargo imports of California fruits. Taiwan and Japan have banned California food imports, as Texas had done last year.

And if the fly does reach the California agricultural belt, including the San Joaquin Valley, a widespread cutoff of out-of-state sales is expected that will devastate the industry even if the fly actually destroys only a small part of the crop.

Further, if a major spraying effort is not undertaken, the fly may become endemic, necessitating blanket spraying programs over large areas of the state every year to control the infestation.

And if Brown continues to work with groups like the environmentalist Ad Hoc Emergency Committee Against Aerial Spraying, California may be pesticide-free, and economically devastated.