

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



Holding the Line on Screwworms

New World Screwworm (a devastating parasite that feeds on living tissue) cases have skyrocketed from 25 per year to over 25,000 in Panama and have now reached Mexico with over 1,000 reported cases - this is a rapidly spreading outbreak that could threaten U.S. livestock, wildlife, and potentially humans.

On April 29th, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins committed to establishing a new production facility in the U.S. to increase our capacity to fight this threat. The discussed facility will produce sterile flies that interrupt the screwworm's life cycle, which is our main defense against this devastating pest.

For over 20 years, a joint international mission between the United States and Panama has protected the North American continent from infestation with the New World Screwworm (NWS). Screwworms are the larvae of the NWS fly. Adult flies lay eggs into open wounds or mucous membranes of any warm-blooded host, and the larvae feed on the living tissue of the infested host, a syndrome known as myiasis or fly strike. Affected animals (livestock, wildlife, and even humans) attract more flies, more eggs, and more larvae, often succumbing to infestation within days if left untreated.

Beginning in the mid 1950's in the United States, USDA scientists and animal health experts developed and deployed sterilized male flies to interrupt the life cycle of the screwworm, reducing and ultimately eliminating resident populations from the United States (1966 peak, 1982 complete elimination), then Mexico (1991) and central America down to the Darien Gap in Panama (2002). In 1994, US and Panamanian officials agreed to a binational partnership (COPEG) to build a facility to continuously produce sterile flies in Panama that could sustain a permanent biological barrier that would protect the rest of the continent.

This effort has been very successful, producing and releasing approximately 100 million sterile screwworm flies per week. When needed, this output has been temporarily deployed to eliminate outbreaks beyond the Permanent Barrier zone, including the 2015-16 outbreak in the federally endangered Florida Key Deer.

However, this success resulted in the closure of all other fly production facilities, leaving the COPEG facility as the only source of sterile flies worldwide. In December of 2023, unusual conditions, including illegal livestock and human movement and sustained warm, wet weather, caused cases in Panama to skyrocket from 25 per year to over 25,000, with additional outbreaks

progressing across Central America and emerging in Mexico in late 2024. Rapid response is essential to stop this outbreak at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico, the next line of defense against the spread of the pest. However, the last production facility in Mexico was closed in 2012, and the escalating outbreak may soon overwhelm current production. In the 1970s and 80s, production rates of over 400 million flies per week were required to eradicate the pest from Mexico and Central America – four times the current capacity of the remaining facility. Experts have warned that without additional capacity, weather conditions favorable to fly survival will result in further expansion.

The Secretary's commitment to establish an additional U.S.-based production facility demonstrates the continued dedication of the United States and the Department of Agriculture to hold the line against this devastating pest and protect U.S. agricultural and wildlife resources from this emerging threat.

About the East Foundation

The East Foundation promotes the advancement of land stewardship through ranching, science, and education. We manage over 217,000 acres of native South Texas rangeland, operating as six separate ranches in Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Starr, and Willacy counties. The lands were bestowed to the Foundation upon Robert East's passing in 2007. East Foundation maintains these ranches for the purpose of research that enables effective decision-making by stewards of working lands and ranch management that maximizes the long-term value of a South Texas ranch. These are working lands where scientists and managers collaborate to address issues important to wildlife management, rangeland health, and ranch productivity.

About the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

USDA provides leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, rural development, nutrition, and related issues based on public policy, the best available science, and effective management. Their vision is to provide economic opportunity through innovation, helping rural America thrive; promote agricultural production that better nourishes Americans while also helping feed others throughout the world; and preserve our Nation's natural resources through conservation, restored forests, improved watersheds, and healthy private working lands.

For more information on our work, visit www.eastfoundation.net

Media Contact:

James Powell, Director of Communications

210-430-4447

jpowell@eastfoundation.net