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Philanthropy & Nonprofits

Screwworm threat looms over Texas cattle industry as East Foundation sounds alarm



The cattle industry is facing a considerable threat from screwworms.

EMILY STRIBLING



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Story Highlights

- Screwworm outbreak threatens \$15 billion Texas cattle industry.
- East Foundation raises awareness as screwworms spread from Mexico.
- U.S. lacks sterile fly facilities to combat potential outbreak.

A potential screwworm outbreak in South Texas threatens the multi-billion-dollar cattle industry.

The San Antonio-based East Foundation is working to spotlight the issue to keep an outbreak at bay. It's a nonprofit organization that [focuses on agricultural research and land stewardship](#) in South Texas, spanning over 217,000 acres of ranch land.

The screwworm is a parasitic fly that embeds its larvae in the living flesh of animals and humans. It has a long history in Texas. In the 1950s, screwworms eradicated cattle and caused long-term damage to the industry – prompting a massive federal response. The government invested billions to eliminate the screwworm fly with the development of three sterile screwworm fly facilities.

The facilities, in Pacora, Panama; Chiapas, Mexico; and Mission, Texas, were designed to breed and release sterile male flies to disrupt the reproduction cycle of screwworms. After decades without significant outbreaks, the Texas and Chiapas facilities closed, leaving the responsibility of producing sterile flies solely to the Panama location.

Neal Wilkins, the East Foundation's president and CEO, said their involvement with the issue started last summer when screwworms were found north of the Darién Gap, a jungle and swampland region that spans the border between Panama and Colombia. This marked the first time in several decades that the parasitic fly had been found in this area, Wilkins said.

"They made it past Panama, made it through Central America, and then made it into Mexico, and that happened in November," he said, adding that what started as just one case in Mexico has spread to around 1,800 reported cases as of the first week of June.

With screwworms spreading from Central America to [Mexico](#), the U.S. lacks [sufficient](#) sterile fly facilities to combat the threat, which could result in a significant economic impact if an outbreak were to occur.

As the spread continues, the amount of time left before screwworms reach the U.S. border in Texas continues to dwindle, as Wilkins estimates the flies are only about 700 miles away based on the areas of Mexico that are reporting cases.

The Texas Agriculture Department estimates that in terms of 2022 values, the cattle industry in South Texas was worth \$15.5 billion.

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Wilkins explained that, at the current rate of spread of screwworms and without a sterile facility of its own, the U.S. is at great risk of being economically affected if an outbreak occurs.

"I would predict the long-term consequences are going to be a big economic hit to farmers and ranchers starting in South Texas and perhaps statewide. You can't help but have that echo through the rest of the state's economy. We've got a little over 142 million acres of farms, ranches and forest lands in Texas. Much of that, somewhere between 85 million and 90 million acres of that is ranch land that supports cattle operations, and we threaten the economic viability of that," he explained.

A new sterile fly production facility would cost \$350 million to develop, according to Wilkins – a cost he describes as a "drop in the bucket" compared to the economic uncertainty the state faces without a facility.

He also shared that even if a new facility is developed, it will take two to three years to begin operating, from receiving federal approval to its construction.

Worry is growing amongst ranchers and farmers across Texas as an outbreak appears to become more imminent by the day, leaving organizations such as the East Foundation responsible for ensuring there is "a good network of knowledge amongst landowners and state agencies," Wilkins said.

"From our involvement, I want to make sure that we increase awareness and that ranchers and wildlife managers are well prepared," he said.

He said that although he hopes screwworms are unable to enter the U.S., the East Foundation is preparing for the worst.

"I'm working with probably the most qualified and level-headed scientists that I know of and I don't think any of them are unreasonable and I don't think any of them are panicking, but every single one of them that have looked at this and are aware of the issue are pretty concerned. They have a pretty high confidence that we're ultimately going to have to contend with this, but every one of us wants to be wrong. I want to be wrong," he said.

THELIST

Here are the 150 largest nonprofits in San Antonio

Total Revenue

Rank	Prior Rank	Organization Name Website
1	1	Christus Santa Rosa Health Care Corp.
2	2	Southwest Research Institute
3	3	Barrio Comprehensive Family Health Care Center Inc. (Communicare Health Centers)
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