

The Painted Apple Moth Eradication Programme (vignette version: C)

On 9 September 2002, the New Zealand Cabinet approved the expenditure of \$90 million for an all-out effort to eradicate the painted apple moth (PAM). In a reversal of its previously-held position, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) had recommended a renewed and extended approach to eradication. MAF Director-General Murray Sherwin had made the decision to change his department's stance after a series of meetings, culminating in a round-table at which he asked each of his senior managers for their individual assessment of the best way forward. At the outset, it seemed that the cumulative advice would be that eradication was a lost cause and MAF's focus should be on long-term management. After an impassioned speech about the need to re-establish credibility with the forestry sector, the mood of the meeting became increasingly more optimistic, ending with the weight of opinion for eradication. Summing up, Murray Sherwin said:

“We are going to go after this with all guns blazing. We will be sensitive to community concerns, but we have been asked to do a job and failure is not an option.”

Anti-spray activists were outraged at news that Government backed all-out eradication. Concerns about the human health impact of aerial sprays had emerged during the successful eradication of the tussock moth in 1997, although subsequent reports confirmed that the chosen spray, Btk, in use for 35 years, could not be linked to any major impacts on human health.

In the intervening years, as health anxieties around the world had been building, along with massive distrust of scientific advice, the Internet became readily available as a source of alternative health information. There was a dramatic rise in support for

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Green Parties, including in New Zealand. Waitakere City, centre of the PAM infestation, had declared itself New Zealand's first eco-city in 1997, and had a large Green Party membership. Residents had been shocked when, in August 2001, MAF invited them to a meeting about possible aerial spraying to eliminate the PAM.

While MAF felt there had been a flow of information about the response in the two years since the discovery, including emails for interested parties, the community had thought "the problem had gone away."¹ People were hostile as MAF described the targeted helicopter spraying to be used; they were suspicious to learn that for commercial reasons MAF could not specify the active ingredient of the spray. Eighteen people, including some protesters, joined a Community Advisory Group.

Telephone surveys were telling MAF there was a high level of awareness and support for an aerial spray programme, if it should be needed. But a high level of anti-spray "noise" was being generated. The Advisory Group proposed an alternative management plan, including ground-spraying and biodynamic "peppering".

The protest volume lifted after the announcement of the Government's support for the all-out eradication attempt, involving extensive aerial spraying. Waitakere residents were "up in arms", calling for paid compensation payment, and free medical clinics. (MAF had already assisted 90 people on its medical register, to avoid the spray). Eighty protesters went to the home of Prime Minister Helen Clark; as the first large-scale spray operation began on 23 October, Government refused to receive a 400-signature letter from Stop Aerial Spraying (SAS). Activists, some suggesting GE components in the spray, linked it to birth defects, respiratory problems and allergies.

As an Audit Department report criticised relationships, communication, and governance in MAF's PAM response was published in November, 1500 protestors marched to petition a Select Committee inquiry. SAS, supported by Waitakere City, asked leading constitutional lawyer Sir Geoffrey Palmer to give an opinion on the legality of spraying. Sir Geoffrey found a case could be taken against MAF, and the spraying "may amount to a human experiment under the Bill of Rights Act."² Calls to the PAM Health Service reached an all-time peak of 120 that day.

Despite the continuing high profile of the anti-spray lobby, MAF's new communications strategy was by early 2003 beginning to pay dividends – as was the spray programme. Only 50 male moths were trapped in January 2003, compared to 2433 in January 2002.

The new strategy was to "demonise" the moth, while providing greatly increased, targeted information to the public. Radio and roadside billboards took the message to Aucklanders idling in traffic. Hard-hitting TV advertisements proved particularly effective. New stakeholder groups – school, pre-schools and local iwi – were involved. MAF made the at times very difficult to maintain decision not to engage in any way with the anti-spray lobby, despite the publication of provably false facts.

By the end of January 2003, moth numbers were falling fast. Eradication of the PAM was now a distinct possibility, despite a solitary moth find in January 2004.

¹ Biosecurity New Zealand, Issue 57, page 5-7 .

² One News Jan 30,2003, downloaded from onenews.nzoom.com/onenews_detail/0,1227,165041-1-7,00.html on 1.12.05

On 13 May 2004, spray operations concluded and the control of PAM returned to “business as usual.” May 2006 was set as the eradication date.

Total expenditure on New Zealand’s biggest ever incursion response had been \$60 million, out of \$78 million appropriated to this point.