

CONVENTIONAL AGRICULTURE'S PROBLEMS COME HOME TO ROOST: When the Light Brown Apple Moth Comes To the Big City

(by Maxina Ventura, Don't Spray California)

Imagine sitting down to a picnic with your kids on a balmy summer's eve and in the distance, the rumble of planes coming toward you. You think they'll head West, to Oakland International, or South, to Hayward Municipal, but wait... they are heading straight through the heart of Oakland, toward San Leandro.

Plumes of gray drift swirl over the Oakland border into your neighborhood and fall around you. You choke. Your skin burns. Your kids are crying, your cats are writhing in pain. As quickly as they approached, the planes are gone.

You hurry the kids inside. You hear the plane fast approaching, once more, swooping down. You don't know what to do but know you have to try to get the filmy mess off the kids, so you cajole them into the bath. No sooner the water touches their skin then they shriek in pain, water reactivating the chemicals in the pesticides poured over neighborhoods. Perhaps another baby goes into respiratory arrest, as happened in Monterey during pesticide spraying for the Light Brown Apple Moth, a moth which entomologists figure may have been around California as long as half a century, causing no crop damage, existing in Hawai'i and New Zealand over a hundred years, called a minor pest.

You wonder how this could be happening; how the state could tell us we have no rights; how politicians can tell us that we have no vote on a matter of life and death while they fast-track a pesticides program, circumventing a long-edified environmental approach to decision-making, codified in the California Environmental Quality Act.

They say the Environmental Impact Report won't be done until after they've used toxic twist ties and traps full of pesticides, and aerial sprayed and painted neurotoxins, possible carcinogens, according to the EPA, on over 3000 utility poles per square mile.

You look up 'democracy' in your dictionary.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture tells us the occasional, or even frequent sightings of this moth is an emergency while botanists, entomologists, organic farmers and agroecologists say it is not. These ecologic experts worry that a pesticides, or even trapping, approach will upset the delicate balance nature engenders, which welcomes and supports insects' natural predators.

Meanwhile nurses, doctors, herbalists, and a professor of pharmacology and toxicology expose the shaky ground upon which CDFA places its health claims. When one of the CDFA's doctors on record is queried by the Berkeley Mayor about whether he'd want his parents or kids exposed to the chemicals, this doctor replies that he wouldn't particularly like it, but he'd accept it (to which a 13 year-old girl responds in typical, straight-shooting kid style, "He sure doesn't care about his family, does he?").

You try to learn about this program; how it came to be; what areas are planned for which pesticide applications as you come to understand that it's NOT just aerial spraying, but the painting of toxics on utility poles, and chemical twist ties hanging from trees and fences, as well as sticky traps filled with undisclosed ingredients in addition to the known pesticides. You are stunned to keep hearing from CDFA representatives, "I don't know."

You are shocked to learn your Mayor has refused his RN Mayor colleague's requests to have San Leandro join Albany, Santa Cruz, Monterey, Seaside, Fairfax, Berkeley, Oakland, and cities and counties all around as they demand an immediate end to this toxic program. He remains stalwart in his refusal to take a stand, though he admits irritation in being challenged by that pesky Albany mayor, the RN who explains that this is a program about economics, not human or environmental health, and points out that with global climate change and global travel, we cannot take a pesticides approach every time we encounter a bug new to us.

Organic farmers catch your interest; they point out that it is just another moth and that IF it were to become a problem, as with the Coddling Moth, they'd provide habitat for its favored predators and take another look after the snacking. But they fear for the economic shakedown they face as CDFA's and USDA's intensive crop inspections are creating damage plus loss of farming time for which they are NOT subsidized.

You find out hundreds were sickened in Santa Cruz and Monterey in the Fall (many still sick); yet, most doctors said it couldn't be pesticide-related and refused to fill out required Pesticide Illness Reports. Public Health turned people away. Later CDFA's doctors said the over-600 complaints (many representing whole families) were dismissed as coincidental. You realize most people sickened did not report. They had no idea where to do so, and the uninsured saw no doctors.

You read about the LBAM on websites and discover that with all the money flowing into Agricultural Departments, both on the statewide and county levels, it seems this might be another, familiar money machine which requires a pest-of-the-month to keep Ag. Dept. wheels turning. You ponder Rep. DeLauro's statement after the recent USDA meat recall, saying that maybe an entity so devoted to representing Agriculture's economic interests isn't the agency to be making health decisions for Californians.

You reread California's Constitution and pull out the U.S. Constitution. You take a long look at the Bill of Rights, and decide it's time to take action. The government which is supposed to be serving people appears to be stuck in a very different place. You demand an end to bailing out conventional agriculture every time it gets scared because the unhealthy soil it has created has created weakened plants not able to withstand much challenge. You tell them to take some of their massive profits and get themselves retrained in the old ways, how to concentrate on creating healthy soil as the basis for healthy farms.

You decide no one is ever going to get away with using pesticides for someone's profits at your kids', or your, peril. You realize you are part of a great turning, a turning toward sustainable living.

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March, 2008 www.DontSprayCalifornia.org for info and drift photos.**

Keep checking back for an updated LBAM section soon, and later whole website. Look for details about our next LBAM panel discussion April 10, 2008, at the Berkeley Ecology Center, featuring Prof. Miguel Altieri, and organic farmers.