



*Environmental Studies Institute
Santa Clara, California 95053*

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Robert Leavitt
Executive Secretary
Light Brown Apple Moth Environmental Advisory Task Force
Plant Health and Pest Prevention Services
California Department of Food & Agriculture

Dear Dr. Leavitt:

I am writing, first of all, to apologize for not attending the past 2 LBAM EATF meetings. In both cases I had previously scheduled professional commitments in other parts of the state that prevented me from attending. I do intend to participate in future meetings. I have followed LBAM issues quite closely in the print media, not because I fully accept their presentation of the scientific data and its interpretation, but because the information within them is shaping the political discourses about this biotic invasion.

Since joining the task force, numerous people have approached me with concerns, ranging from the trivial to substantive. With this letter please find a copy of an email to me from a university professor who responded to an SF Chronicle article by inserting his questions, and by offering additional concerns at the end. Most of the ~38 questions he has inserted into the newspaper article are substantive, and have been discussed at EATF meetings, and inside CDFA & APHIS-PPQ I am sure. I share this not because I expect you or anyone to provide a response, but rather to illustrate how one educated person reads and responds the media coverage of this problem. The media coverage may be beyond CDFA's control, but it has shaped public opinion, and the public concerns about this effort. We have seen hysterical responses to the eradication program, but there are thoughtful critics of it as well. Setting aside the biological or agricultural rationales for undertaking an eradication effort, the dynamics of how this is playing in the media and public sphere does not auger well for fostering additional public support. The eradication effort might be fully feasible according to a biological logic but fail because of a socio-political dynamic.

I have thought about the LBAM eradication efforts and the concurrent socio-political phenomena, and re-read some of the political science literature on contested decision

making. From a social science perspective, controversies over the LBAM efforts emerge from:

1. contestations over the characterization of the potential harms caused directly by the LBAM invasion, and
2. arguments about the distribution of potential nontarget harms caused by eradication attempts.

My interpretation of this is as follows. The non-agricultural public is not convinced that any agricultural pest poses sufficient risk to them to justify aerial spraying of any substance. It would not matter whether the substance CDFA wanted to spray from planes was sugar water. At issue is the spraying itself, which evokes images of war, and of invasion of private property. Note that this polyvalent image of overhead spraying simultaneously prompts visceral reactions from persons of the political left and right (see the article by Larson: "[War of the Roses: Demilitarizing Invasion Biology](#)"). The non-agricultural public, especially in the greater Bay Area, has, in general and over time, adopted the perspective that agriculture is a polluting activity, and is therefore unworthy of their political concern. Therefore, no sacrifice (i.e., accepting aerial spraying) is worthy of serious consideration. Documented evidence of the LBAM harming non-agricultural (social or environmental) communities might serve as the basis for justifying aerial spraying for CDFA, and conceivably among the public. This evidence might exist, but it has not been presented persuasively in the media to hundreds of thousands of taxpaying homeowners. I must also note that none of my personal and professional contacts in the ag community (outside the EATF) have expressed support to me for this eradication effort.

The spread of the invasion and the entrance of public officials into this debate have created a new dynamic in the media and in public perception. California's political geography is now going to play a critical role as well. The sad irony of this ag pest invading the region of California most charged by environmental politics should not be lost on the EATF, nor the Secretary of Agriculture. Elected officials during an election year have strong motivations for portraying themselves as defenders of the public and its safety. Incumbents have motivations to introduce legislation that enhances that portrayal and to repeat media accounts that question the credibility of public agencies and their decision making. Recall that in Maslow's hierarchy of human needs that safety is second only to physiological human needs. Since Bay Area elected officials do not have to represent California agriculture's more general needs, they can present themselves as guardians of public safety by raising questions about aerial spraying, CDFA and USDA-APHIS. This has a political logic, but also has the potential to undermine legitimate efforts to address common good problems such as biological invasions.

Extensive research into the social psychology of risk perception has provided a rich set of findings about the social dynamics of trust and novel technologies. The public does not generally respond to the technology itself but rather the credibility of those introducing the technologies. With novel technologies, public discourse reflects public perceptions of the messenger, not the message. The "asymmetry principle" posits that

trust-destroying messengers have, in general, more credibility than trust-building messengers. It is much more difficult to foster trust than to erode it, which is borne out by the media coverage of public perception of LBAM. For an introduction to the social psychology of risk, see Slovic: "[Trust, Emotion, Sex, Politics and Science: Surveying the Risk-Assessment Battlefield.](#)"

My prime motivations are the well-being of Californians, California's environment, and California agriculture. I honestly do not have a definitive position on LBAM eradication efforts. In the fall, the public debates were essentially restricted to NGO groups and local officials in two counties. Since I joined the EATF, the spread of the LBAM to new counties and the entrance of elected state office holders into the public debate have reframed the social context and the public's interpretation of the eradication effort. CDFA might actually have the technological tools to eradicate the LBAM, but I now believe that the social and political processes in play will undermine this effort, and frustrate its success.

This has in turn prompted a new and very serious concern. My concern is that the political outcome from these debates will politically cripple the capacity of CDFA and APHIS to prevent future invasive pests from establishing. I perceive Secretary Kawamura to be an honorable, decent public servant, concerned with the common good. I believe he and I share the motivations mentioned above. Yet I am deeply worried that social dynamics already in place – in the political sphere and in the public imagination – have such forward momentum that they will thwart the LBAM eradication and hobble future invasive species detection, prevention, eradication and control efforts.

I note that at the January meeting there was a motion for CDFA to work toward creating an invasive species coalition. As I explained to Ted Batkin at the November meeting, I joined the EATF not because I thought LBAM was eradicatable, but because I am concerned about the trend line of biotic invasions in California. I hope this new coalition will undertake a strategic analysis of the socio-political dynamics of biotic invasions, for example, reviewing political lessons from the Medfly crisis. I also hope that LBAM eradication efforts do not have the unintended consequences of undercutting political support for the work of this coalition. It will already confront many challenges, scientific and social.

Kind regards,

<signed>

Keith Douglass Warner OFM

kwarnar@scu.edu

Social science research in biological control and agroecology:

<http://itrs.scu.edu/kwarner/agecobic.htm>