



## Screw worm fly – it's just across the water

It's the season to be alert: with the monsoon rains comes increasing risk of screw worm fly moving into Australian territory.

And that, bluntly, is a near and present danger.

Australia is the only continent with tropical regions that remains free of screw worm fly, a pest which seen as the one that most threatens our livestock, our native animals and birds, our pets, and our public health, right across northern Australia.

From the countries to our north – PNG, Indonesia Malaysia and the Philippines, screw worm fly could arrive as an adult fly via a storm front, on a boat or as maggots in an existing wound.



So far, we've been lucky, according to Principal Biosecurity Officer with Biosecurity Queensland, Robert Hedlefs.

“The discoveries to date have been two dead adult flies in a light fitting in a livestock ship returning to Darwin from South East Asia in the 8's; and maggots extracted from a head wound on a woman who'd returned from Brazil in the late 90's.

“However, as the flies can disperse up to 100 km, and as they exist in coastal areas of PNG that are within 5 kilometres of Australian Territory, it's more a case of when, not if,” he said.

“We also need to be aware that changes in agriculture and livestock practices can change risk factors and need to be monitored. It is also possible that climate change could play a future role in expanding the Screw Worm Fly's preferred habitat southward.



“For these reasons it is imperative that Australia maintains a constant awareness and surveillance program.”

Recognising this, a national Screw Worm Fly Preparedness Strategy has been in place since September 2004, and is regularly reviewed to ensure an adequate level of protection is in place.

It focuses on constant surveillance, early detection and quick reporting. The doctor's rule applies: 'prevention is better than cure'.



Screw worm fly prefers warm, humid conditions, and in those conditions they can complete their life cycle and build-up numbers rapidly - each female can lay around 1,000 eggs and in tropical areas the life cycle can be completed in under three weeks. The adults are remarkably similar to other blowflies found in Australia. Unless larvae (maggots) are sampled and identified by experts the pest could remain undetected for months.

Dr Hedlefs says this difficulty in recognising the pest and its ability to establish an over-wintering colony makes early detection the key.

“If we were to have a lag between colony discovery and control, eradication would be very difficult and prolonged. And, given the vast distances across the north, an incursion might remain uncontrolled for some time.

The main armaments are insecticides to kill maggots on individual animal infections, while on a regional scale, the eradication operation would require a sterile male fly release program.

“But that’s a slow, expensive process, as we’d first have to build a fly-factory and get it up to full production. A small facility would cost in the order of \$40M,” he said.

“You can see why we need early detection – and the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline - 1800 675 888 – is the number to call.”

While Screw Worm Fly has never actually been recorded in live animals in Australia, authorities warn that’s no reason to slacken-off the vigilance. This fly can attack any warm blooded animal, (including humans) and there are plenty of domestic and wild hosts for them in Australia and Torres Strait.



## What does it look like?



Screw worm fly looks like an average-sized blue blowfly. Its maggots appear whitish to cream in colour and have bands of dark spines growing on each body segment giving them the appearance of a ‘screw’.

They lay eggs in insect bites, scratches, umbilical cords, wounds or moist openings on a warm-blooded animal and the maggots feed on flesh and develop to approximately 3mm in diameter and 15mm long. In a wound, the maggots stay bunched together. As they grow and the wound expands; a pungent, sickly smell is produced. The maggots drop off the animal after feeding for a week and later emerge as an adult fly.

**What happens if they are seen?**

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If an animal is suspected to have screw worm fly, it should be isolated immediately, and the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline - 1800 675 888 – should be called; or contact a private or government veterinarian, or animal health officer.

Authorities will need to examine the maggots to ensure they are not screw worm fly. Don't forget to check other animals, working dogs, domestic pets and co-workers.

Sampling Kits can be provided from State Department of Agriculture offices across northern Australia.

For more information: <http://animalhealth.com.au/programs/drm/swf/>

If you see anything unusual on your property call the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline on 1800 675 888 or the Exotic Plant Pest Hotline on 1800 084 881.

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