

Livestock Producers Need to Aware: New World Screw Worm (NWS) in Central America

The New World Screw Worm is working its way up through Central America, once again. This potentially deadly livestock pest was eradicated in the U.S. by 1966 through joint efforts between Mexico and the U.S. Because the pest is endemic in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and countries in South America, the U.S. APHIS collaborates with Panama to maintain a biological barrier zone in eastern Panama. The barrier is created by releasing sterile male screwworm flies; and until recently, this barrier has held.



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In 2023, NWS detections in Panama exploded from an average of 25 cases per year to more than 6,500 in one year. Since then, the pest has been detected in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Mexico—north of the biological barrier that had successfully contained the pest to the south for decades.

What is this creature, and why the concern? This parasitic fly impacts mammals and birds, laying eggs (often as many as 200 to 300 eggs at a time) at the edges of wounds or at the mucous membrane orifices. Within 12 to 24 hours the eggs hatch, and larvae emerge. These larvae have hook-like mouthparts that burrow into tissue, feeding as they go like a screw being driven into wood. Extensive damage is caused by tearing at the hosts' tissue, enlarging and deepening the wound as more maggots feed on living tissue. This is extremely painful to the host and untreated, can lead to death. Keep in mind this tends to be an issue in livestock or wild animals as they are less scrutinized.

In February of this year, APHIS announced that it was shifting sterile fly dispersal efforts to Mexico—the northernmost point of the current outbreak. Effective May 11, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke L. Rollins announced the suspension of live cattle, horse, and bison imports through U.S. ports of entry along the southern border due to the continued and rapid northward spread of New World Screwworm in Mexico.

Please know the fly has NOT reached the U.S. There have been three false reports that the fly was detected in Louisiana, Memphis, and Missouri—but all of these reports are FALSE. However, it's important to be vigilant and watch our animals. Pay close attention and watch animals for open wounds or sores. If they exhibit irritated behavior, head shaking, you smell decaying flesh, or spot maggots in a wound, contact your vet immediately.

This is a foreign animal disease that is reportable to state animal health authorities and to USDA-APHIS. The U.S. is responsible for reporting NWS to the World Organization for Animal Health and to our trading partners. If NWS is suspected, contact the State Veterinarian's office at 615-837-5120 or the USDA Area Veterinarian in Charge at 615-517-2642. Suspicious cases will be evaluated, and samples may be submitted for laboratory confirmation.

For more information, please call your UT/TSU Extension office at 615-898-7710 office or visit our website at rutherford.tennessee.edu.