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ROLE OF THE AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE IN VERTEBRATE PEST CONTROL

MARVIN D. DAVIS, Farm Advisor, San Mateo County, Half Moon Bay, California

Frankly, I often wonder what our role is in vertebrate pest control. It seems to me that we in A.E.S., are frequently treading in the "twilight zone" of pest control. This is because of the wide diversity of problems which arise within an area such as I represent. I feel it is most significant that our county was invited to cover the role of A.E.S. in vertebrate pest control and discuss the tremendous variations and considerations necessary to serve an urban/semi-urban to rural county. Those of you familiar with San Mateo County readily recognize the potential problems due to population growth, topography, climate and vegetative distribution.

I feel the best way to adequately cover this subject is to break our role into three categories with which you are all familiar. These are: research, education, and liaison. I shall cover each of these phases as they relate to typical situations which frequently involve our assistance and services.

RESEARCH

Generally we, as Farm Advisors, do not set up and carry out pure research without the involvement of experimental station personnel and our specialists. There are several reasons for this which I shall not dwell upon. Generally, however, in the counties we are not budgeted or physically equipped to handle research programs. Frequently we do carry on applied projects which relate to existing problems within the county. An example of this would be Dr. Walter Howard's gopher bait evaluation studies on rangeland situations, a portion of which was carried on in San Mateo County. As you all recognize, we in local situations are faced with actual control problems no matter how large or how small. To me as a Farm Advisor, the greatest value of thorough research is its adaptability to practical use under field conditions. Again I must emphasize the scope of each program varies tremendously as do the control requirements. At this juncture your job as researchers may often become distressing. Here I ask you, as a researcher, which is most important - one rattlesnake in a backyard compared to one hundred rats in a garbage pile; or one old doe and a fawn in a pansie bed compared to ten gophers in an acre of alfalfa being grown for seed?? Yes! At each of these levels of pest populations we must recognize a problem of one type or another. Only when research is carried on with these variations in mind will it encompass problems prevalent throughout the realm of vertebrate pest control.

EDUCATION

Frankly, I hesitate to use the word "educate" as it has the connotation of instilling a particular point of view in one's mind. This is obviously not the case when you stop to consider what you are saying. I doubt very much if you could "educate" an ardent "audubonist" that pigeons should be destroyed because they are over-abundant in a park. No! Rather let us concentrate on producing an "awareness" to the problems of vertebrate pest control among all interested parties. Immediately we ask, "Who should be made aware of the needs for control measures?" At this point we frequently get into "muddy waters". Often times it is just as well to keep very quiet about control activities, particularly when birds, deer, or dogs are involved. It is in the semi-rural areas that we frequently have some apprehensive moments. Case in point: deer depredation in gardens is very serious, especially when it is your own garden. However, the neighbor does not have specimen floral material being grown for show purposes - but he does enjoy watching the fawns frolic in your nasturtiums. At this point, which of you is correct? You with your pellet gun and pet beagle or the neighbor with binoculars? This type of situation is not evident in research but it is very real. We could continue virtually all afternoon citing individual circumstances involving incidences similar to this one with deer. Yes, I will admit that I am involved in a unique area with agricultural and open areas in close proximity to heavily populated areas. However, I ask you - how long will it be, especially in California, before there are numerous such areas? As our urban requirements spread into open lands we can expect to see the problem become more acute.

Generally we recognize that the public is relatively unaware of the potential threat posed by some vertebrate pests. In many instances, the public's passiveness thwarts efforts to cope with even the most simple pest control problems. With this in mind we are back to

the question of who should be aware of the problems involving pest control requirements. Now, with the general public out of the way, this leaves a few interested individuals and you and me.

LIAISON

When we speak of a Farm Advisor we immediately visualize an individual actively disseminating the latest technical techniques to his clientele. This is in fact a normal liaison activity and certainly an important part of the job to facilitate awareness among cooperators. However, when vertebrate pest control information is released or requests are made for such information, it is directed to individuals or specialized groups. A great deal of the liaison is with organizations or professional pest control operators. However, it is not uncommon to deal with individuals that have problems ranging from gophers and moles in the garden to flickers and sap-suckers pounding on the house. I feel an important point should be brought out while we are speaking of individuals with a small scale pest control problem - that is economic feasibility of control. When crops or large scale control programs are involved, frequently the entire operation is hinged on economic feasibility. Therefore, you in research are forced to look to the least expensive control measure that will produce adequate relief from the particular pest population. However, we must be aware that there are specialized problems to which the cost of relief is of no consequence. Invariably, under these circumstances control requirements far exceed our normal agricultural pest control costs. Also, it is at this point of specialized control requirements that dissemination of information is most difficult. The reason is a lack of first hand knowledge or results involving some of these specialized situations. I must also say I have heard some strange tales of vertebrate pest control.

SUMMARY

In summary we should emphasize the need for continued and broadened research programs to include future problems of pest control. Also, we must recognize the requirements for the specialized problems of control.

To answer the question of what is the role of A.E.S. in vertebrate pest control, I feel we might define it simply as - COMPLEX!