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A MUNICIPAL BIRD CONTROL PROJECT

Jim Steckel
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The subject I was asked to talk about this morning is Municipal Bird Control. Our organization was asked approximately a year ago by a rather high level income urban municipality lying adjacent to Columbus, Ohio, a bedroom community so to speak, to come into their area to do a commercial bird control project. The problem species was pigeons. The community was having a blight. Real estate sales in the town had dropped off as a result of the pigeon problem. The taxpayers were getting together and had been harassing the council for about six months to do something about the pigeons.

I talked with council and part of this taxpayer group a few months before we were actually asked to start the program. After talking with the council, a taxpayer group, health officers, the local businessmen's organization, and so forth, it was determined that we would attempt municipal bird control in their community.

We decided to use a pre-bait bait program with a toxicant of .6% strychnine on whole kernel shelled corn. We looked at all of the other opportunities for control and came down to two applications. One was the avitrol application and the other one was strychnine application. Because it got publicity in the local newspapers, surrounding communities said, "No avitrol, don't send those birds our way." One of the municipalities said they would get an injunction in case this program was established. So we decided not to go with the avitrol program.

Now our plan, of course, had to be cleared; and when you talk about work within municipalities, you begin to talk about how much labor it is going to take. And you've got to talk about a lot of public relations labor. This public relations labor isn't at the service man level. It is at the owner, operator, president, general manager level. You have to talk to, among others, the Ladies Auxiliary of the local Catholic parish, the Protestant church, the sewing circle, and anybody that demands to know what is going on. There was a good deal of time and effort spent on this phase and one of the things that helped us a great deal is that we had the consistent cooperation of the regulatory people, the state people, the federal people, and the local health and agricultural people here in Ohio.

They did an excellent job, as they usually do, in helping to give us the confidence that we needed and the confidence that this council needed to take a rather bold step. They were putting forth a fair amount of money at a time when all municipalities are looking into red budgets and the possibility of increased taxes. We initiated our program on 15 September 1969. It is to operate through 15 March 1971. We set the program up so it would run through two winter seasons.

We originally set up 68 baiting locations, primarily on public grounds, such as park areas, along river banks, under railroad trestles, on top of municipal buildings, in municipal parking lots and other areas where we could protect the bait from animals and children and so forth. From these 68 baiting locations, we ended up with 14 locations where we got significant bait acceptance. These areas were scattered generally enough over this municipal area so that we felt we were feeding most of the pigeons in the community. History tells us that we had 70-80 per cent of all the pigeons in those 14 locations, and from what we hear from other people who are doing municipal work this probably was all we could expect to get. After a pre-baiting period that took us from 15 September to 15 November, we went to the toxicant materials at those locations as we could. Not all at one time because we didn't have the manpower to clean up, and we wanted to be sure that we were on the scene and able to pick up the dead birds promptly. We had the cooperation of their health department, their sanitation department, and their police department in helping us to survey the area as far as the dead birds were concerned.

Between 15 November and 10 December we were able to get our poison bait out at all of the 14 bait locations at one time or another. During that period of time we had two rather heavy snows. It's unusual in Ohio to have heavy snows that early in the year. This year we were fortunate in getting snow cover and this gave us a real advantage that we hadn't anticipated.

Following that period of time when we got good bait acceptance and a good kill; we got cooperation from all of the people who had agreed to give us cooperation. We then got permission from the council to go into private homes and private commercial property upon request, after we had surveyed to see if it was a satisfactory bait location. This was publicized in the local newspaper, and we did get calls from home owners and commercial establishments saying that "I still have pigeons on my roof or the pigeons are still nesting in my gutters." These calls were directed in this case to me because I felt that I wanted to know about each situation and I wanted to deal directly with the people concerned. If anyone was going to be called on the carpet, I was going to be the one who had to answer the questions and I had better know what was going on. We would survey each situation to determine whether it was a satisfactory bait location. If the situation was satisfactory, we told that party that if we can get bait acceptance we will go ahead and treat. We will let you know when we are treating and you have some responsibility with us as far as picking up dead birds. Also what is the situation with your neighbors, and the neighbors' dogs and cats?

We have had, luckily, and I say luckily because it is more luck than skill, no serious complaints. We have had complaints. We have one case in this community that will be taken to the Ohio Supreme Court. They had already taken the municipality into court before we ever got into it, however. This was a family that was feeding pigeons and squirrels and everything at ground level. There is an ordinance in this community that says you cannot do this. They have defied the ordinance and they are going to take it to the Ohio Supreme Court. We have had to work very closely around this situation, not to upset the court case. But we have had no actual complaint from that party. I think they were trying to keep their case clear too.

We have one more winter season to go. We, in our survey, feel that we have the population down to what is called a controlled population or a 90% reduction.

Nobody has questioned at all the effectiveness of the program to date. We believe, to the best of our knowledge, that they are completely satisfied with the work as it has progressed so far. We hope to go back and clean up these last few birds. We may go one step further this year. As you know we went the municipal or public route first, then we went to private homes. All of this was done with bait. We've talked to the council about this, and we may be asking for permission to shoot a few strays because we've got some rather cagey birds in certain areas particularly around a railroad trestle. We've had a real tough time there, and we are probably going to have to go to some kind of shooting session to clean some of those up.

I have told you, I think, the highlights of the program that we have established so far. It is a very common, simple program. Nothing new, nothing secret. And we've been lucky with it so far. I'd like to take the last few minutes to answer any questions that you may have.

DISCUSSION:

T. STOCKDALE: Jim, knowing about what you've killed, what's your price per bird at this point?

J. STECKEL: The price per bird at this point is rather high. We had thought it was going to be somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 cents. We are above that. We are about 70 cents per bird. But we had a very high early expenditure in all this public relations time. Fantastic. We have to put in our time just about like an attorney does. The senior attorney gets so many dollars per hour. The junior gets so many dollars per hour. And that's just about the way we do with our people. I had a good deal of time in this initially that I don't plan to have in the future. We're coming down to a lower cost now and we ought to bring that cost per bird down. I don't think our 50 cents per bird is going to be too far out of line.

T. BOOTH: How many birds are you talking about? Approximately how many birds have you taken out of this town?

J. STECKEL: We have picked up 23,000 birds. We anticipated that in this town we had 50,000 birds. Now it doesn't add up when we say we think we have 70 or 80 per cent of them. But we no doubt moved some of those birds to new locations. Even baiting does some moving. They don't all drop dead.

T. BOOTH: Then you don't get every bird?

J. STECKEL: We don't recover all the birds. That's true.

T. BOOTH: Did you use any system whereby citizens could call in and tell you I've got a bird, ten birds in my yard, come pick them up—The health department the police department, or anybody like this?

J. STECKEL: Yes, I should have mentioned that maybe more clearly. We had the cooperation of the Health Department, the Sanitation Department, and the Police

Department. We had responsibility initially, that is, on the day that we put out bait. If we put bait out for the early morning feeding, we put it out at four o'clock in the morning and then had that day's responsibility for clean up. Then following that time, the city had the responsibility for clean up. There is a newspaper which is published in this little community, and the mayor has a front page column that he writes as a personal thing and in this we had explained just what we wanted done.

F. OBERST: Did you have any secondary poisoning problems? STECKEL: Not that we know of.

F. OBERST: I thought you were leaving yourself kind of open. Sometimes, depending on the type of community you are working, I can see where you might get into problems.

DELEGATE: Jim, did you have a map of the areas where the birds were feeding? How did you select your baiting sites?

J. STECKEL: We selected the original 64 baiting sites because these were the most suitable sites where feeding was likely to take place, and also those sites that could be protected. Areas where we could get the bait up and away from other animals and away from some of the other birds that were in the area. We had a mourning dove problem at that railroad trestle with pigeons and mourning doves sitting side by side. The guy that goes in to shoot is going to have to be able to tell one from the other. We had an area where we had some cardinals. We had to make a lot of selection; we did have to use maps and we did have to watch some of these feeding locations. One of our best feeding locations turned out to be an area where we had regular cardinal feeding.

DELEGATE: How long did it take you to run that survey?

J. STECKEL: Well, we had our first call on this thing in April 1969, and we didn't get started on anything until September. We weren't surveying every day in there, of course. We did nothing but prebait and watch bait locations from September to November of 1969.