The Screwworm Resurgence: A Call To Action

By Hadley Hemphill

This is not a rerun. It’s not a sequel. And it’s not a problem we can afford to relive.

Some of you may remember the dark days before 1966, when the United States was plagued by a threat so destructive it forced an entire industry to change the way it protected its animals.

The screwworm.

It cost our nation billions of dollars and devastated countless families whose livelihoods depended on healthy livestock. Through tireless effort and innovative strategies like the sterile insect technique, we didn’t just manage this threat, we eradicated it. For decades, it felt like this menace had finally been put to rest.

But history doesn’t stay buried when vigilance fades.

Recent outbreaks in Central America and Mexico serve as a stark reminder that the screwworm is not a ghost of the past, but a lurking danger of the present. These parasitic larvae, a nightmare from our history, are once again knocking at our door. Howdy, my name is Hadley Hemphill, and I stand before you today not just as a beef cattle rancher from the heart of Texas, but as a passionate advocate for the agriculture industry and the livelihoods we hold dear. Because this is not just about remembering history, it’s about deciding whether we repeat it. Screwworms do not spread because we are incapable of stopping them. They spread when biosecurity, education, and early detection are treated as optional instead of essential.

For those unfamiliar, screwworms are the larvae of Cochliomyia hominivorax, a species of fly documented by the USDA that burrows into the living flesh of warm-blooded animals. That single characteristic is what makes them so devastating. You see, it's not the fly itself that’s so dangerous, it’s the damage that it causes.

Female flies lay their eggs in open wounds. When the larvae hatch, they feed on live tissue, causing severe pain, rapidly worsening wounds, infection, and if left untreated, death. This threat escalates quickly.

In the 1950s and 1960s, ranchers and livestock owners across the southern United States lived this reality every day. Cowboys spent daylight to dark riding pastures, checking animals, and treating wounds. As they approached an infected animal, the foul smell of decaying flesh often came before the sight. Cows with faces eaten away and calves dying from infections that began at their navels were not rare; they were routine.

As of 2023, screwworm activity began resurging in parts of Central America and Mexico. According to the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, recent outbreaks have occurred in northern Mexico, including cases reported in Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, and Coahuila. As this is a developing issue, on Wednesday June 3rd, the very first U.S. case was

reported in La Pryor, TX. These detections have prompted heightened surveillance and containment efforts by the USDA and livestock officials across Texas and other southern states.

Today, when we hear about screwworm, most of the conversation centers on the cattle industry—and for good reason. Cattle operations have historically been among the most vulnerable to this parasite. Organizations like the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association have taken a leading role in prevention and response efforts, helping protect not only their industry, but agriculture as a whole.

But it's important that we don't let that focus narrow our perspective. Any warm-blooded animal is susceptible.

In February of 2026, for example, a horse imported from Argentina and traveling to Florida was found to have screwworm larvae in an open wound during quarantine. Fortunately, the issue was caught early and treated quickly. But that case serves as a reminder: horses are not exempt.

This is especially relevant for horse owners whose animals may not be observed daily, including non-resident owners, pasture-kept horses, or operations where animals are turned out for extended periods. Pasture foaling increases that risk even further. For breeders, particularly in southern regions, vigilance isn't optional—it's essential.

And it doesn't stop with horses. Sheep, goats, hogs, and virtually all livestock species can be affected.

So how do we manage that risk?

One of the most effective approaches is integrated pest management—thinking not just about treatment, but about timing, environment, and the parasite's life cycle. That means strategically using products, adjusting management practices, and reducing exposure during periods when screwworm flies are most active.

Historically, newborn animals have been the most vulnerable. A simple, wet navel can attract the flies, and without prompt detection and treatment, infection was almost always fatal. For operations that rely on pasture birthing, this raises an important consideration: timing. Shifting breeding and birthing seasons toward cooler months can significantly reduce risk. That often requires more structured, management—defined breeding seasons.

In the first few months of life, routine management practices like castration, ear tagging, branding, dehorning, and tail docking all create wounds that can attract screwworm flies. These procedures should be timed, whenever possible, to coincide with periods of lower fly activity.Even something as routine as shearing sheep or goats can introduce risk through small cuts or abrasions. In those cases, close monitoring and proper wound care become critical.

Now, not every operation can immediately adjust its schedule—and that's a reality we have to acknowledge. But, close observation and prompt treatment can make all the difference.

Luckily, treatment methods have evolved significantly since the first outbreak. In the 1940s, a product known as Smear 62 was widely used—a labor-intensive insecticidal paste that killed larvae and helped prevent reinfestation. While effective for its time, it was highly flammable and has since been replaced by safer, more efficient treatments.

Today, producers have access to a range of modern tools, including products like Exzolt Cattle-CA1 (fluralaner), Dectomax-CA1 (doramectin) for cattle, sheep, and wildlife, F10 spray for livestock and Ivomec (Ivermectin) in emergency cases. Various EUA-authorized products like NexGard have been approved for pets as well.

But livestock are only part of the picture. Wildlife may, in many ways, be at even greater risk—because we don't have the same ability to intervene. You can treat a cow or a horse. You can't just go out and doctor a population of white-tailed deer. For example, only 6 days ago, a black bear in Nuevo Leon was found to be infested with screwworms.

And that raises a serious concern. Imagine what screwworms could do to an already declining quail population in Texas. The impact could be devastating. So what should we be looking for?

Signs of infestation in wildlife can include open sores, visible maggots, and a foul odor associated with decaying tissue. Even something as small as a tick bite can become a site for infestation. Behavior changes are also important indicators—animals may show signs of irritation, shake their heads, isolate themselves, or appear lethargic.

Seasonal factors play a role here as well. Birthing seasons increase risk for both mothers and offspring. Breeding seasons bring increased fighting among males, leading to wounds that can become infested. During the 2016 outbreak among Key deer, mature males experienced particularly high mortality rates during the rut.

Fortunately, there are ongoing efforts to support prevention, let's take the livestock feed industry for example. Companies like Lyssy and Eckel Feeds are working toward approval for incorporating ivermectin into livestock and wildlife feeds as a proactive measure against screwworm.

During the Southwest Screwworm Eradication Program in the 1960s, sterile flies were released across affected regions using small cardboard boxes—many of which ranchers still find in their pastures today. It's a reminder that the success of the Southwest Screwworm Eradication Program in the 1960s came from coordinated action and innovative control methods like sterile fly releases—and that same kind of vigilance, cooperation, and early intervention is still essential today to prevent screwworm from ever gaining a foothold again.

I know what some of you may be thinking. We beat this once. We can beat it again. And you're right. But victory does not come from assuming the past will protect us. It comes from vigilance.

History has already warned us. Whether we listen or repeat it is up to us.

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Note for the public: Anything that the Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association or the USDA (screwworm.gov) puts out is reliable and accurate if you’re looking for further information.