

OF MICE AND MADNESS

The Autumn 2011 Australian mouse plague has eased momentarily as we settle in for Winter and pending winter crop development into spring. Animal Control Technologies (Australia) Pty Ltd (ACTA) is taking this short opportunity to discuss the past season, and caution growers and industry on control efforts that will be required in the coming months.

Mouse plagues are a common enough occurrence in Australian agricultural history. Recent reviews of plague histories have shown plague events are increasing in frequency to every couple of years, from every 5-7 years. ACTA closely monitors each season as it occurs to gauge potential mouse incursions on crops and forecast season demand for Mouseoff ZP Rodent Bait. With this data, we advise and consult with State and Federal Governing bodies on potential issues.

In October 2010, ACTA advised all government mouse experts in SA, VIC, NSW and QLD with whom we work closely as a team, that based on our experience of managing mouse infestations successfully over the last 15 years in Australia, we may be facing the "mother of all mouse plagues" during 2011. Seasonal conditions, remaining mouse populations and the plethora of remnant crops left in paddocks were all viewed as likely to produce an explosive mouse population, and potentially, a plague.

Over the summer break, ACTA took the precautionary step of manufacturing and storing on site several hundred tonnes of MOUSEOFF® Zinc Phosphide Rodent Bait, as well as procuring a substantial store of the active ingredient, zinc phosphide, in readiness for the 2011 winter cropping season. This was significantly more stored product than we had ever carried over summer before.

At the end of January 2011, ACTA re-evaluated the situation and increased our predictions estimating there may be a need for over 1,000 tonne of product required. That figure was more than double any previous mouse plague usage. ACTA, again, approached the Government agencies and reiterated our substantial concerns for the upcoming season.

February arrived, and MOUSEOFF® Zinc Phosphide sales commenced – a full 8 weeks earlier than in any other year. At this same time, we approached the APVMA (Federal

chemical registration body) and discussed the need to secure further stores of zinc phosphide urgently, as the situation looked highly likely to exceed anything we had ever seen before. ACTA re-evaluated further, and estimated we needed to be prepared to produce 3,000 tonnes of treated grain. ACTA liaised with the APVMA, and ultimately applied for a permit to import additional active urgently via air freight to ensure a continued supply of bait to industry. Similarly, the APVMA and State authorities were of the same opinion that mouse numbers exceeded all previous estimations, and industry needed to be prepared for the worst. ACTA imported via airfreight from three sources at considerable expense. Air freight of chemical commenced prior to our strategic reserves being exhausted, and this significant additional cost was completely absorbed into the production cost, and worn by the manufacturer.

ACTA also invested in increased plant capacity in case the problem developed as predicted. Moreover, we increased our production rate to substantially increase our finished product stockpile. The cost of such stockpiles is factored into bait prices, at the request of the grains industry. ACTA proceeded to brief agronomists and rural merchant chains of our actions due to the forecast. ACTA continued its extensive research into optimum treatment strategies, mouse movements and options to apply bait with fertilisers, etc throughout this period.

In April (over 8 weeks ago) demand escalated all over the eastern states simultaneously and on an unprecedented scale. Over 1,000 tonnes of orders were received in a single week, more than has ever been ordered before in the largest previous mouse plagues. ACTA and the grains industry was in uncharted territory, and a massive response was needed. It is clear that mounting the largest campaign ever needed in Australia to combat mice has required a huge effort, some very quick judgements by those experienced in these matters and some significant risk investment so that crop protection was maximised.

Supply chain constraints have resulted in delays in meeting all orders. Delayed bait supply in some instances meant some farmers lost early emerging canola crops and had to replant with cereals. ACTA has the greatest empathy for farmers caught in this situation and regret any losses. We sincerely wish they could have been avoided.

Excellence in Pest Animal Management

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Supply constraints, such as the gamma sterilisation of grain needed for high quality, bio-secure bait manufacture, has never before been put to such an extreme test. We found the demands exceeded the whole of Australia's capacity to process grain to us for high quality bait manufacture. ACTA has always utilised the services of the three sterilisation plants in Australia, though the sheer scale of bait demand sorely tested these facilities ability to bulk sterilise, and service all their clients. Nevertheless, a huge quantity of bait (>3,000T to date) has been produced and delivered immediately to landowners through the rural merchant chains.

We thank all our suppliers for maintaining such a high level of output to us consistently over an extensive period of time throughout this situation. It has been a 'whole of industry' approach to get us this far.

ACTA also initiated the use of 500 kg bulka bags under permit to help reduce costs, and initiated the use of unsterilized MOUSEOFF® Econobait under APVMA permit. This has been set up in four states and has further reduced costs to farmers. MOUSEOFF® Econobait is in reserve for immediate use if needed while manufacture of the sterilised bait continues as quickly as possible. This variation to the formulation and manufacturing process were neither simple nor cheap to achieve. ACTA's manufacturing plant commenced double shift operations and working over the weekends. Additional staff were employed, and on all fronts (production, dispatch, administration and extension) the team has banded together and tirelessly worked to produce bait, get it out the door, and keep our client's informed of the situation as it developed. We would like to acknowledge the efforts of the 35 ACTA staff (more than double our normal numbers), our suppliers locally and internationally, the 1,000 or so merchant agronomists who provide day-to-day service to farmers in real need and the various freight and logistics people around Australia who have worked tirelessly for months on this battle. They have all done a marvellous job in minimising the impact of this extraordinary and unprecedented event and have saved, so far, at least 2 million hectares of Australia's valuable crops. The loss of these crops may have resulted had we not worked together as we did. Such a loss would have had disastrous consequences for individual farmers, local rural communities and even Australia's GDP if we had not been so effective. The story is for the most part, one of success.

Understandably, given the successful effort that has been made by so many people to help landowners, it is disappointing to hear some agri-politicians call for enquiries into what has gone wrong. We would prefer to see these people, who have by their own admission reacted well after the need was recognised by experienced mouse managers, to focus their energy of preventing the misuse of chemicals in the grains industry by a minority who seem not to appreciate that such actions will cast a long shadow over Australia's grains image and has the potential to do more damage than the rampaging mice.

We are not there yet.

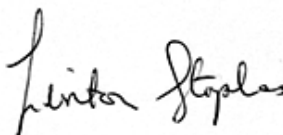
Mouse numbers are decreasing as mice head underground for the winter. Growers that have not controlled their populations now, are highly likely to have a huge emerging population in the spring. ACTA strongly urges all producers to remain vigilant and monitor their crops, particularly when the weather starts to warm up. ACTA asks grain-growers to consider what their baiting needs may be going forward, and plan now. Mouse plagues, like many pest invasions, can 'creep up' on an industry, making the value of professional advice vital. As ACTA informed the industry last year and early this year, we are now advising again, high numbers of mice are most likely to emerge with spring, attacking winter cereals at the stem elongation stage and beyond, and legume crops from the podding stage.

Growers, if we were caught out by the sheer size of the autumn outbreak, let's not make the same mistake going into spring.

- ✓ **Crop monitoring is essential.**
- ✓ **Bait early, and bait in conjunction with your neighbours for maximum control.**
- ✓ **Further maximise your baiting efforts by conducting post treatment monitoring.**
- ✓ **Re-bait if considered necessary, and if unsure, seek the advice of your local agronomist or ACTA Regional Sales Manager.**

ACTA always seeks to provide high quality protection to farmers from pests with our products FOXOFF, RABBAIT, MOUSEOFF, DOGGONE, RATTOFF, SLUGOFF and PIGOUT and our consultancy work on RCV and in research with the CRC. Our own on-going and extensive Research and Development efforts continually search for ways to improve technology options in conjunction with the Invasive Animals Cooperative Research Centre and other commercial partners. This level of commitment to industry is unsurpassed by our competitors. Through the current trying period, ACTA has been immensely appreciative of the loyalty and understanding demonstrated by grain growers, merchants, grower representatives, Government bodies and industry alike. It is evident that such situations only benefit from a combined front of attack. Together, we will beat the next battle

Prof Linton Staples
Managing Director



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