

The New DDT?



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“We need to look, with an overall perspective of how toxic chemicals affect everything —not just one nuisance,” Suffolk County Legislator Sarah Anker was saying.

Ms. Anker has been a minority voice on the County Legislature in regard to an especially toxic chemical called methoprene, one that the Suffolk County Division of Vector Control has been using widely—and with enthusiasm—to kill mosquitoes. And this is despite several states, including neighboring Connecticut, and municipalities all over the United States banning the use of methoprene.

“I’ve had enough of these chemicals which we think are doing the job but are more detrimental than helpful,” says Ms. Anker, who is a resident of Mt. Sinai.

She will now be getting support in her fight against methoprene from Bridget Fleming of Noyac, the new representative on the County Legislature for Southampton, East Hampton and Shelter Island towns. Previously Ms. Fleming was a Southampton Town Board member. Last year, the legislature over the eloquent objections of Ms. Anker—voted again to allow the Division of Vector Control of the county’s Department of

Public Works to again spray with methoprene. Thus, in 2016, the chemical—which kills “non-target” insects and other life besides mosquitoes—will again be sprayed in the county.

“Suffolk County, in the 1960s, led the way nationally in banning the use of DDT,” says Kevin McAllister, founder and president of Sag Harbor-based organization Defend H2O, who spoke at length before the legislature prior to its vote. “Relative to methoprene now, Suffolk County has really lost its way.” Says Ms. Anker: “What happens in government is, when something has been done over and over for many years, it’s hard to change the process. We need to change this process. There are alternatives. I think it’s going to take more advocating.”

Suffolk County indeed had a major role in the banning of DDT. The publication, in 1962, of Rachel Carson’s landmark book “Silent Spring” was key nationally, but also important was a challenge to DDT then in Suffolk County. A lawsuit, handled by Patchogue attorney Victor Yannacone Jr., was brought against the Suffolk County Mosquito Control Commission, which was spraying DDT widely.

Among other impacts, the DDT was causing the shells of the area’s signature bird, the osprey, to become paper-thin and break when sat upon by mother birds.

The committee in the fight here became a national group, the Environmental Defense Fund, headquartered for years in Suffolk County (in East Setauket) because of its roots battling county government’s use of DDT.

DDT is gone, the majestic osprey has been able to return in large numbers—but the chemical industry has been busy pushing other pesticides that are also toxic to marine, bird and other animal life. The Suffolk County Mosquito Control Commission is gone, too, but succeeding it has come the Division of Vector Control, which has been as big a booster of pesticides as the old commission.

In 2007, four members of Suffolk County’s Council on Environmental Quality—set up as the environmental watchdog in county government—resigned after a majority on the County Legislature gave its yearly approval of a mosquito control program developed by the Division of Vector Control that involved extensive application of methoprene.

“We did our research and homework,” Dr. John Potente, one of the four, told the legislature in 2007. The CEQ, he testified, found “damning evidence.” But a legislative majority of 13 voted to ignore the CEQ and again let Vector Control have its way.

Then a county legislator and casting a no vote was the current Brookhaven Town supervisor, Edward Romaine, who commented that the Suffolk County Legislature and one county administration after another allowed Vector Control to get its way. “You cannot turn a blind eye and let the ‘experts’ do what they want,” he said. “These chemicals may be causing more damage than the threat of mosquito-borne disease.”

Legislator Fleming, previously a Southampton Town Board member who, following her election in November, took office at the start of 2016, says: “There is considerable concern in our local fishing industry that non-target crustaceans—such as horseshoe crabs, blue crabs, spider crabs, Jonah crabs, lobster and grass shrimp—may be adversely affected by methoprene. And the National Pesticide Information Center reports that methoprene is moderately toxic to some fish, and highly toxic to others, and may accumulate in fish tissues.

“While we obviously must continue to take seriously the importance of combating insect-borne illnesses, we must also follow the age-old motto of the medical profession: ‘First do no harm.’

“Recent studies,” says Ms. Fleming, “have shown that alternatives may exist to methoprene that specifically target mosquitoes and black flies, but do little harm to non-target species.”

The legislative majority and county administration—and the methoprene-devoted Division of Vector Control—need to listen to Legislators Anker and Fleming.