

The increasing need for netting fruit orchards against bat and bird damage and the increasing problems in affording netting

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ABSTRACT

Exclusion netting systems are the only humane method for preventing flying-fox damage to orchards, especially during seasons when natural food is in short supply.

As the forests that provide natural food are eliminated, and flying-fox pressure on orchards therefore increases, the need for netting becomes more acute. However, poor returns make it hard for the grower, especially the small-scale grower, to meet the cost of exclusion netting. Low interest loans that cover the cost of netting are available through the NSW government's Rural Assistance Scheme. However, the criteria for assessing eligibility for the loans are too limiting and should be altered. In addition, fruit growers find it difficult to get accurate, up to date information on netting. A netting hotline should be established to provide growers with information on net design, how to reduce the cost of netting their crops and contact details for contractors and suppliers. Finally, flying-foxes are important to the environment. We need to develop programs that educate people to conserve flying-foxes, rather than exterminate them.

The increasing need for netting

Effective exclusion netting systems for orchards were developed at the end of the disastrous 1989 harvest in the Northern Rivers area of NSW (Gough 1992). Such systems are the only humane method for preventing flying-fox damage to orchards, especially during seasons when natural food is in short supply.

One of the main reasons for flying-fox predation on fruit trees is the loss of natural food sources. Flying-foxes feed on flowers and fruits from forest trees. For 200 years, Australia's forests have been cleared for settlement, primary industry and forestry. Most recently, remaining patches are being lost from the encroachment of urban development on rural and coastal regions. Many farmers, including orchardists, are looking to sell their properties for urban or rural subdivision as the farms become unviable due to increased production cost and lower market

returns. Major subdivisions on the far north coast of NSW, such as Ballina Headlands and Casuarina/ Pottsville, are classic cases where heathland and melaleuca food areas have been cleared for development. The vagaries of mother nature with her droughts and flooding rains can also interrupt flowering in native trees and destroy food sources for flying-foxes.

As natural food sources are eliminated, and flying-fox pressure on orchards therefore increases, the need for netting becomes more acute. Netting does work. Bat damage to fruit can be prevented – and without harming the animals. In 1990 we ran experiments at our orchard, Pamplemousse Park, to determine optimum net specifications. All areas netted to those specifications have suffered no bat damage. A bonus is that damage from rosellas is also eliminated. (Slack 2000).

Increased problems in affording netting

Poor returns make it hard for the grower, especially the small-scale grower, to meet the cost of exclusion netting. The government, through its Rural Assistance Scheme, promised cheaper interest rates for loans to help erect netting. There was no mention of means testing to secure the loan, but this in fact occurred. The value of assets owned by farmers was taken into account. The value of the land alone was often enough to push the farmer over the limit for eligibility. Removal of land value from the means test would make access to these loans easier, and netting more affordable.

Experience has shown that government loans need to cover not only the installation of nets but also their insurance. Hail damage to nets, such as occurred at Wollongbar in 2001, can be financially crippling. However, the cost of insurance is often prohibitive.

Another problem is that the cost of installing netting has risen so much that the decision not to net has become a justifiable gamble for some growers. Lack of competition among manufacturers and erectors of netting has become worse over the last decade. This can leave the grower with little choice, and consequently little power as a consumer.

At least one supplier who gave verbal guarantees for his work, is now causing despair to a number of growers. They have found that the supplied netting is faulty, but cannot as yet obtain redress. It is hoped that the problem can be amicably resolved, but meanwhile this situation is likely to deter others who might otherwise contemplate netting their crops.

Fruit growers find it difficult to get accurate, up to date information on netting. The establishment of a netting hotline has been discussed with NSW Agriculture. A possible site for the hotline is the

Tropical Fruit Research Station at Alstonville, in the heart of the area worst affected by flying-fox damage. Such a hotline would allow ready access to information such as current costs and the names of reputable consultants, netting contractors, sub-contractors and manufacturers of poles, cables and netting. As well, growers would be able to request a copy of the video "How To Net Your Orchard". The video is available through NSW Agriculture. It describes how growers can save money by doing some or all of the work themselves. This information could also possibly be made available on NSW Agriculture's website: <http://www.agric.nsw.gov.au>.

Conclusion

Finally, as a pioneer low-chill stonefruit grower on the North Coast of NSW, and a wildlife carer as well for some 14 years, I realise the future of our wildlife will soon be in the hands of today's younger generation. We should develop an educational program or programs that will appeal to the public, capturing their interest and highlighting the importance of flying-foxes to the environment. We need to educate people to conserve flying-foxes, rather than take the old approach, extermination.

To conclude, I remember in 1999 our Wildlife Carers were displaying their work regarding rescuing injured flying-foxes, on the main street in Lismore, NSW. My wife was carrying Nelson, her one-eyed, Black Flying-fox, that she used for public education. An interested group of people gathered about her as she spoke of the work the flying-foxes carry out, pollination, etc. One middle-aged woman passing by remarked, "not those B—y flying -foxes. They should shoot all of them." A young male about 10 years old grabbed the woman's dress and said, "Mum, this is Nelson. He was at school, remember?" Redness crept into her face.

References

Gough, J. 1992. Drift nets of the Northern Rivers. Pp. 14-17 in *Proceedings Fruit Crop Protection Seminar*, edited by K. Blade. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. Hornsby, NSW.

Slack, J. 2000. *NSW North Coast Experience with Netting*. Orange Agricultural Institute, NSW Agriculture. Orange, NSW.

QUESTION & ANSWER

CHRIS DICKMAN: Thank you very much, John. Some food for thought and time for some questions.

GLENN HOYE (Fly By Night Consultants): I just want to make a comment, John. Maybe with the ongoing loss of habitat the government might be better off paying you to grow the fruit to feed the bats.

CHRIS DICKMAN: Thank you, John.